Trompe L’œil

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Trompe L’œil

by bacchusdionysus

Summary

trompe l'oeil
/ˌtrômp 'loi/
noun
French art term meaning, 'to deceive the eye.'

Sir William Graham, a talented medic and artist, finds himself close with a Lord who knows a decadent portraiteer who he believes can teach William to become a master painter. Will begins an apprenticeship with the talented older man, but what he cant understand is just how his teacher produces such captivating portraits that seem to transfix its viewers...including himself.

Chapter 1

“Graham!” Commander Crawford hollered throughout the large tent of makeshift sheet curtains and cots. His hand flew to swat away a white veil dividing cots. William shuffles the very few belongings he had into a beige duffle, he stands a little straighter and makes his way to his commander's voice. Ringing his hands he appeared in front of his chief.

“Sir,” He called to him, giving a bow of his head out of respect. He suspected this was his goodbye. All of his patients and medical staff, as well as his peers of soldiers. Had already wished him luck on his journey home and gave their best to him for getting out. Some farewells were tearful. Former patient, Zeller, whom he had saved from a serious and life threatening infection of his leg, gave him a long and sorrow filled farewell, expressing greatly how he owed William his life. For fellow medic Fredrica Lounds, she practically caperd when she heard of his resignation. Ever since William offered his belief that bloodletting was a sham and would not practise it on his patients, she harboured disdain as she was a firm believer in the more superstitious practices, swearing that leeching had cured her melancholia.

“Your services will truly be missed, Graham, You have half my men out there glassy eyed about your departure.” The commander cracked a small smile, and he could've sworn he was just as misty as half his men.”You simply cannot be replaced, Might I start a war just to get you back.” William and Commander Crawford shared an air of humorous smiles. William’s cheeks flushed with a bloody red glow, he wasn't used to such flattery.

“Oh i'm certain you'll get your hands dirty enough i'll be back here in a fortnight.” he laughed this time more guttural and jack shared in it. The chief couldn't deny the legion had suffered their share of calamity. Commander Crawford had served in quite a few battles under Lord Blooms ruling and was now a commander of troops christened ”The Italia Legion” who served for both Italian affairs as well as noble affairs. Each soldier decided which Italian noble they would pledge their allegiance to when they signed on and from that they were placed with the troop who served that crown. For Willam, and the rest of the troop, they were affixed to the Bloom dynasty.

“I've written to Lord Bloom. He’ll take good care of you. I'm sure of it.” Will approached his commander and embraced him, knowing this would be considered out of line. While the Chief was taken aback, he too embraced. “Take care of yourself William, you're a bright boy. Write to me and the boys, will you?” He stepped back, misty indeed. Will gave a gracious nod.

“Of course, I really must be on my way, I won’t make it to the palace by nightfall on foot.” Will expressed, having had a summons to dine with Lord Bloom at the palace when he reached Florence. William couldn't hide his nervousness. The life he had here at the base on the outskirts of Italy was all he'd known since he was 17 and prior to that he was a stray scrounging around Italy like a skinny little cat eating scraps and receiving passing affection from curious on goers, Will, like a cat, shied away because he found solitude in himself.

Despite his similarities, William was more of a dog person, having always admired their undying loyalty and naive nature.

“Nonsense Graham, You'll be taking a horse. The Lord already agreed to have it sent back when you've arrived.” Sensing a breath of contest, the Chief immediately put up his hand and turned his head. “I will hear nothing more about it.” William offered a wordless smile of thanks. Commander paralleled with a smile of ‘you're welcome’ and clasped a hand on William's shoulder giving it a soft squeeze, soaking in his appearance, his essence, before slipping out of the tent. William stood there replaying this moment and relaying it to his memory.

He zipped his duffle and slung it over his shoulder, exiting through the back of the tent to avoid any more goodbyes. Emotionally he was rung out and had, somehow, avoided spilling any tears. William went to the makeshift stables and picked white horse that had been ridden once before by William when one of his men injured his ankle on the field which called for Willam to make a tourniquet there on the spot before the soldier could be moved. He gave the white pony a temporary name of “Peiro” due to his belief that if you name your pony he will bring you to where you need to be with a smooth ride and good fortune. He fastened his duffle to the back of his saddle. Clothed in his medical uniform still, he walked to the spigot and filled his canteen with water before crossing it back around his chest to rest at his left hip for easy access while he was holding the reins.

He swiftly propped himself on his saddle and slung his leg over before settling in the most comfortable position he could muster on the stiff leather. His fingers tightened around the reins and let out a shallow breath. He whipped the reins up and Peiro took off. William couldn't deny that change was hard for him. He was thick as thieves with his medical staff and soldiers, save Fredrica. He was sure he could acclimate to his pre legion lifestyle. He wasn't bad company by any means. Besides even with his soldiers, he always kept his most profound thoughts to himself, basking in his own mind. Perhaps that was why he picked up drawing. His mind worked in different ways when he drew, like he was pouring bits of himself into his sketches. His mind was an overflowing chalice and when he tipped his head to draw in his little red leather sketchbook he spilled himself on the page. Sometimes in rich spurts of sketches and other times in little drippings of fully fleshed drawings that over time became full pages absorbed in this thick liquid from his chalice.

Will rode wind chapping his cheeks and biting his dry lungs. It was quite cold but not too terribly so for december. He committed some of the beautiful landscapes to his memory to pour onto his sketchbook later. His mind pondered over how his night with the nobles would go. They were just normal people and he knew that but instead of finding comfort in that fact it made him more nervous. He couldn't cast himself as a different species from these people in his mind and give himself a write off as to why they may not mesh. Even with their immense privilege and excessive lifestyle, at the end of the day they are just people aren't they? If he could not find any redeemable charms to win them over he feared they may come to regret their decision to give him a home.

You see, Will had earned such a good reputation for himself, after serving his five year contract, Lord Bloom offered him a plot of land and a cottage in Florence if he signed on for 2 additional years as well as agreeing to aid the legion in the result of war. Will graciously

accepted as he, 2 years ago, wasn't quite ready to leave his men anyways. Now at 24 he was returning to Florence still not sure if he was ready to leave them but much more sure of his living situation.

He had nothing to his name and knew he had to create a new life for himself and having a cottage was a great start as well as it being in Florence which he would have never been able to afford had he just began working right out. He had no idea what job he would land on when he reached Florence, he saw that as tomorrow's problem. As for tonight he had a place to lay his head and a dinner courtesy of the Lord he had been serving since he was 17.

An hour to sunset he reached the palace grounds. He stared in awe at the beautiful home, regal and beige fitted with a very talented grounds keeper and sculpted fountain complete with a sculpture of venus rising from the water as she had from the seafoam in those stories long ago. A servant approached him and bowed to him, helping him dismantle his horse and taking the reins to draw the horse to the palace stables. William walked up the staircase to the grand door where he met another servant, A woman this time who had a white head dress pointed at the top above her ears and loosely hanging around her shoulders, Undoubtedly a nurse. She greeted him with a large toothy smile. They bowed slightly to each other.

“Sir William Graham I am utterly pleased to make your acquaintance, Please please come in.” She ushered him by the arm, practically dragging him to the drawing room. She was unlike any nurse he’d ever met, not severe or overly formal and certainly not old or unattractive. Infact, She was youthful just a few years older than William he’d bet. “Oh how rude of me! I'm nurse katz. We've been waiting for your arrival. Everyone is so pleased to meet you Commander Crawford raves about you mister.” she wagged her little olive toned finger at him with a little smirk. Instantly William liked her and couldn't help but mirror her smile. She ushered him to sit in one of the couches adjacent to the bookcase filled with gorgeous printings of leather bound books.

“I have to be honest with you, good nurse.” He started and she sat beside him on the edge of the sofa.”I was a simple medic, No better or worse than any other.” He said earnestly but in an almost whisper. She flapped her hand about and gave him an incredulous look, drawing up her brows, pursing her lips and shaking her head.

“Pish-Posh, Modest Mister Graham! Our lords legion has lost fewer men in the 7 years you've served than any other nobleman's legion.” WillIam had not known this, Probably due to all of those bloodletting and leeching practices, he thought. “And if there's one thing our lord fancies,it's to brag.” she said in a sing-songy voice. Will finally understood why he was an asset to his majesty. “The lord and lady have been dying to meet their magical medic. Lady Alana too. In fact, they pulled out all the stops for tonight's feast. Oh be sure to send your compliments to our Lord's taste, he takes great pride in having the best of the best. I hear he has a secret consultant who advises him on all the best indulgences. I suspect its….” She seemed to fill the room with all of her lord's secrets and William was transfixed. He wished everyone was like nurse Katz, eager to spill her guts without any pressure and an ‘appropriate response.’ A silly little smile plastered on William’s face as she droned on and on. He felt her energy infectiously sparking inspiration in his brain.

William, almost subconsciously, Slipped out his little red sketchbook and started to flesh in the nurses form. Eyes flicking from her, who had been heedlessly roaming about the room now jabbering on, to his book where he started spilling onto the page. Finally he caught the nurse's eye. Curiosity struck her and she came around the back of the settee to see over his shoulder. She gasped audibly, “ It looks just like me, you captured me so well, good William. A man of many talents I see?” William’s cheeks flushed as he was not used to many onlookers, save his legion lads who modelled for him. He tilted his head to meet her gaze for just a moment before looking back to his book.

“I dabble.” He let out meekly. Not sure how to respond to his admirers compliments. “I picked up the hobby for those particularly long, less bloody days in the medical tent.” He cracked a little deflecting smile.

“Tsk tsk, you do more than dabble. With some training you could become a master easily, and when you do, you had better come paint me a portrait mister Graham.” she flashed her pretty teeth again, William would be attracted to her if he hadn't felt so drawn to her platonically, a candle lit from his own flame he’d say.

“If I find myself stumbled into a master painter, I will gladly paint you Miss Katz.” he laughed as this was his first day back in Florence and he had no intentions of taking on an apprenticeship because he needed income more than knowledge. This was just a hobby after all. The nurse made a sound of glee, happy to have properly impressed will enough for such pleasantries as a promise of a portrait.

A knock came at the door and a beautiful mousy haired woman appeared in the doorframe. She stood stoically and straight and her clothing suggested she was not the princess William had heard of but also not a lower level servant.”I am pleased to make your acquaintance Sir Graham.” She says almost clinically, keeping even tone and eye contact.

“Ahh! Hello Lady Margot. Sir William, This is Lady Alana's lady in waiting Margot Verger.” Nurse Katz says with a nod of assurance. Rounding the couch stand near Miss Verger.

“Pleasure to meet you Miss Verger.” He stood to bow to her, before settling himself back on the sofa tucking his little book into the pocket of his overcoat.

“I do hope I'm not interrupting,” She folded her hands over her skirt. “Lady Alanah requested I tell you she will be joining you after her piano lesson. She hopes you don't think her rude for not joining you sooner.” She sounded genuine but still rather short, as though she could have said more but only said as much was necessary to get the point across.

“Oh I can assure you that Mister William does not think her rude.” Nurse was right, He didn't and the fact she knew that so easily told him her flame was indeed lit from his own. He smiled at him with a nod.

“Very well,” Lady Verger bowed her head and snatched the sleeve of Miss Katz's dress, pulling her into the hall with an audible grunt. William giggled to himself ‘very subtle’ he thought. Nurse Katz gave Lady Margot a questionable stare. “Listen Beverly, Alana was spying on him out the window and is practically smitten!” She whispered in a serious tone laced with some intrigue. Nurse Katz face split wide into a mischievous smile.

“Of course she does, he's a catch Margot, I mean really I would not mind working under the ruling of Lord Graham. She's always had exquisite taste and she hasn't even met him yet!” She gossiped. “Although we can't get our hopes up, he's quite aloof. He lives right off the palace grounds in the old groundskeeper cottage now and I already plan on keeping him in close contact.” She said keeping an air of intrigue without pushing anything. She truly had taken a liking to the man and didn’t want to see him as a pawn in some ploy to finally get Lady Alana to commit.

William scanned over the books, fingers tracing the spines. All of these books seemed to be first editions. A priceless collection. William had dreamed of having his own study one day with books from foreign seas. He wanted to be a cultured man especially in European affairs at the very least. He knew his way around, although not having access to such a colourful array of texts meant he was not on par with his dinner hosts, not that he expected to be. Their wealth was insurmountable to William.

His eyes landed on a beautiful bound edition of “Doctor Faustus” He was drawn to the book because one of the more well off soldiers carried around a copy of it, pouring over the book repeatedly, seemingly never tired of the biography. Will had half a mind to crack it open and reclaim his seat on the sofa. He very nearly took up his mind's offer but realised he would be dining soon and couldn't finish the book in the short time he had. His need to read in great depths was insatiable. The few chapters he would go through waiting for supper would be but a sampling that would only leave him hungrier.

He slid the book back into its rightful home in the book case, letting his finger linger for just a moment longer. He turned his body to peer out the window. The sun was taking its last breaths, kissing the grassy hills of the countryside north of the palace. The hedges and beautiful fountain were blissfully illuminated with an orange glow. The bubbling water flowing through the fountain was glistening and shimmering as though someone had mixed diamonds into the aqueducts that connected the fountain to the stream. He committed this scene to memory and had he been unaware of the princesses' soon arrival, he might have pulled out the book heavy in his pocket instead of saving it to his brain's rolodex of picturesque inspiration.

He reclaimed his cushion on the sofa, crossing a leg over his knee before softening his posture into the back of the settee. Eagerly awaiting the return of Miss Katz. She eased him with her long winded, verbose manner. It wasn't often he sought comfort in someone so instantaneously. He secretly hoped the family treated her well and gave her enough freedom to come visit him when he settled in. He could see himself making her acquaintance for years and years to come. He knew his terse disposition would be off putting to most. Nurse Katz seemed to have enough words for both of them. If there was anyone who would accept his gentle reserved tongue, he was sure it was the nurse.

As if summoned by his thoughts she opened the dark wooden door and flapped her hand as if telling William to stand. At first he gave her a side glance before catching the implication, Lady Alana. He stood with the best posture he could muster with one hand slung around his middle, the other pressed to the small of his back. He readied himself to bow before catching the eye of a beautiful blue eyed brunette on the arm of her lady in waiting. She was dressed in the finest cloth. Her hair was long down her back with a neat little braid in the centre on her

crown. Her gown was a dark blue which complimented her pale skin and deep red flush. So breathtaking he almost forgot to bow and was quick to it when he remembered.

Lady Alana gave a raise of the eyebrows and a quiet little smile to her women as she caught his stare. Deeping her youthful blush. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir Graham.” She said with a dazzling smile. Will straightened himself before giving her a nod.

“As I am to you, Princess Alana. I assure you the pleasure is all mine.” He was glad he was even able to get the greeting out as he really wasn't accustomed to this level of company and discourse. He figured he should add something so they weren't just sitting in stagnant air, although good nurse would never allow that to happen.”Or do you go by Lady Alana?” He asked earnestly.

Lady Alana stepped further into the room before taking her seat on an opposing settee, Lady Margot took her seat beside her. “I think Lady is sufficeable. Something so juvenile about the title of princess wouldn't you say?” she gave a little polite laugh. William mirrored a smile, toothless though, unlike Lady Alanas.

“Although I've never been a princess, I do think I'd feel quite foolish being coined as one.” He breathed out in a joking manner. He received polite laughs from the women opposite him and a not so polite one from Nurse Katz who now resided beside William, hands perched on her knees, body tilted toward the young medic. They continued with light banter and Miss Katz even convinced Lady Alana to demonstrate her beautiful talents on the harp.

The young noble had just taken her slender fingers off the thin strings when a soft knock came at the drawing room door. “Please come in.” She stood from the stool that sat low to the ground beside the instrument and clasped her hands in front of her belly.

An older gentleman with a kind face entered. He was clearly a servant. He bowed and straightened,”Dinner is served, The lord is most pleased to dine with our special guest and requests the most urgency.” He said with a smile. He was awaiting a response for a brief second.

“Thank you, Price. Tell father we will be right down.” Lady Alana said with grace. Price bowed and exited the room with a smile. William knew it was show time and he was far from at ease. His blood jittered throughout his body sending waves of nervousness to each of his limbs. He stood on unsteady footing and the nurse strode beside him at the heels of Lady Alana and Lady Margot as they ventured to the grand dining room.

William had never seen an array of such high quality food and festivities. The great table piled high with fruits and vegetables, (no doubt from the palace garden) Breads and savoury pastries filled with meats and fish. The table was laced throughout with winter blooming flowers and berries. The rich table spread was a salivary display of the likes of Jan Davidsz. De Heem. It particularly struck a chord with William, resembling a Dutch painting he'd seen years before Still Life with Ham, Lobster, and Fruit. He had a sketch of it in his book but the sketch held nothing to the delicacies that were laid before him. He dreamt of a feast his whole life. The skinny little ally cat he was, he didn't know where he would put all of the food he prepared himself to consume.

Lord Bloom entered through an opposite passageway. He also bore fabulously indulgent clothes, a mixture of deep navy blues and light silvery slate greys. He was the commander of the room from the second he appeared in it. His wife dressed in a powdery coral complimenting her husband beautifully. Her black hair had been tied up in several bunches of braids that were pinned to the back of her head. The nobles were joined at the elbow and when they stopped their descent, standing behind their chairs, there was a chorus of bows. Lord Bloom gave an approving nod while the staff pulled out the chairs for William, Lady Alana, and Lady and Lord Bloom. They all sat While each beautiful glass was topped with a rich red spirit.

“To our lovely visitor Sir Graham, You have been a very valuable asset to me, my good man!.” His face filled with pride as they all gathered their glasses for a toast. A smile resting heavily on his face. He then raised his glass to his crescented lips. A smooth long drag of wine sat on Williams palette. He savoured his spirits. Who knew when he’d get a fine indulgence like this again. As he swallowed, Bacchus himself delivered him a sweet little heat at the base of his throat and a blush at his cheeks.

“I cannot express my gratitude toward you enough, my Lord.” William said authentically albeit in fewer words than he intended.

“No need, you've served me very well, and I am honoured to reward you with something as meek as a cottage. Never in all my years has a medic shown such handy skill and loyalty to my crown.” He smiled as the servants including good nurse Katz ardently began filling each plate with a glorious assortment of satiation. William was becoming the embodiment of glutton waiting for his plate. “The cottage is right off the grounds. I'm sure after supper I can arrange a servant to assist you there. Your journey must've been tiring.” Each person was served their dinner and William nearly started eating before responding.

“That would be lovely. The journey wasn’t too taxing thanks to my stead, Peiro.” William smiled outwardly.

“Well then, I'm very happy to hear.” Lord Smiled back and glanced at his beloved daughter and wife as though he was giving the stamp of approval. “So Shall we dine?” A small sound of an approval from both his kin prompted William to do the same.

They all began to tuck into their meals making small chatter, Including William’s' regard to the Lord's fine palette. Just as Miss Katz predicted this gave the Lord much jubilation, sparking throws about how he has spent years perfecting his sense of taste. Alana gave a giggle and mentioned something about how when she was a child they ate like peasants because her father was so accustomed to that lifestyle having married into her mothers wealth. William laughed and actually enjoyed the family banter. They really were like any other family. It both charmed and terrified William to no avail.

William was ravishing his gorgeous pork cutlet fashioned with some sort of dark mulberry coloured sauce when the Lord playfully quipped back at his daughter, “And could you believe, sensible William my gorgeous daughter on the eve of her 25th year still is yet to be betrothed.” Alana quickly blushed and gave a quick offended ‘Father!’ back. William was genuinely surprised as she was quite an astonishing young woman.”She's a captious creature Mister Graham, Perhaps you could lend a hand in sorting that persnickety nature out, Ah?”

He winked at William. Had he not been on his second wine perhaps he would have rolled it off his back but with spirits warming up his liver, among other things, he had no choice but to cast a downturned blush at the floor. She was lovely indeed but William was so very content in his solitude and this life of grandeur was not for a slippery little fox such as himself.

“You'll have to excuse him dear, You know how he yearns for grandchildren and someone to pass along the crown.” Lady Bloom reasoned at both William and Lady Alana. They continued their dining as the Lord and Lady babbled on.

William had finally finished internally stuffing and remaining appendages that had space full to the brim with sweetly ripened fruits. Popping his final small spoonful of pomegranate seeds into his mouth. It seemed that everyone had finished up just as he had. “It's been a treat having you Young man, please come join us anytime you'd like.” he said with a graceful smile.

“I may just have to take you up on that, My Lord. My stomach sends immense gratitude.” Will delivered much more comfortably now he had been lushly drunk. “I'm hoping that after I settle I could find a job here in town, perhaps then I can repay your grace.” Will usually would be more aloof, he never was an open book but he and bacchus had been duelling for control over his mouth, I bet you can surmise who was winning.

“Oh my dear boy, There is always a place for you in my court if you would rather. I compensate handsomely.”Will did ponder on it, he knew his jellied brain was in no position to give a response just yet but it felt much more rude to leave him with no response at all.

“I-” William began

“My Lord,” God save the Good nurse, Will would have kissed her for shutting him up. “If I may?” She asked whilst refilling the Lord's chalice.

“Go on then Nurse,” He said, no hint of harshness. Simply intrigue.

“Sir Graham is quite the artist, he showed me his illustrations in the drawing room and this boy has great potential.” Well he would have kissed her but now he was just as red in the face as he was at the courting proposition.

“Is this true?” The Lord asked with eyebrows raised.

“Uh, yes my Lord, it's just a hobby I picked up along the way.” He felt flayed open. Art to William was His escapism, His means of showing true empathy and understanding. He could create as Minerva had so bestowed upon him the ability to.

“Please indulge me, William.” The king gave an encouraging smile. William sucked in a breath. He grasped his beloved red book and pulled it out. Swiftly, as to ‘get it over with’ handed it over to the Lord sheepishly.

Alana, Lady and Lord bloom gathered flipping through his little book. Will tried not to watch, terrified of ridicule. “William this Brilliant! I have been struck with a momentous idea,”

Lord handed his little book to his daughter who had been eagerly awaiting a closer look. “Why don't you join us for our winter solstice ball? Our portaiter will be in attendance and that man has many connections. I would love to show you to him. Perhaps he could be of assistance to you.” William was so taken aback by the offer and he knew if she showed any reluctance it would be very rude of him. He was nothing more than a medical hand some hours ago and now? He was being invited to a lord's prestigious ball and if that wasn't enough, the aforementioned lord was doing him a personal favour.

“I would be beyond honoured my lord, How could I refuse such generosity?” In reality Willam stomach was in knots at the idea.

“Then it's settled. I really must retire now, my good man.” He stood and William mirrored him before bowing. “I will have Nurse Katz show you to the cottage. Good night dear William. I do hope to be seeing you soon.” WIlliam nodded, not having the chance to respond properly before Lord and Lady Bloom made their exit.

“I believe this belongs to you,” Lady Alana approached with William's book stretched out. He ducked his head with a rosy tinted smile.

“Thank you Lady Alana, for everything.” He grasped his book, holding it to his chest in a clutch for control.

“William ,you are extraordinarily talented. I am thrilled you'll be joining us at the solstice.” She bowed to him and he followed her lead. “I really must be off now, have a wonderful night Sir William.” She slipped past him with a smile seemingly fixated at her mouth.

At that Nurse Katz was already ushering him out of the palace through the courtyard to a soft little candle lit cottage some 10 minutes from the palace ,”I had it prepared for you while you dined.” She said, clutching her lantern. “I do hope you find it to your liking if not just send for a servant, our Lord instructed them to help you settle in.” She pulled her wool shaw tighter around her shoulders.

“Can I send for you, Good nurse?...F-for innocent company of course.” William stumbled not meaning to imply she should wait on him, or give him the other sort of company. The nurse simply laughed.

“Of course you can! You're such a blundering drunk, Oh so nervous.” She gave him a bow before turning her back to stride toward the castle. Her lantern above her head swayed slightly in the breeze.

William entered his new home and for the first time since dismounting his steed, felt as though he could breathe. He allotted himself no time to ponder over the furnished, and stocked home that was now his before he found his bed and disrobed, tucking in for the night. William lulled off to bed in a matter of moments. His lush disposition surely had a hand in that as well.

Chapter 2

William awoke to warm sunstream, birds had chirped and nested on a branch outside the cottage window no doubt. It was peculiar for him. On base he'd awake before sunrise to tend to his duties, well trained and obedient like a domesticated wolf. He almost preferred it to the mid morning sun, piercing him. By the great star's position, William estimated it to be the 10th hour of the morning. Far too late for William's liking. Yes, he indeed preferred his grey-lilac mornings, brisk and plush with moisture pervading the tent. He wasn't quite sure how to get himself risen at that hour with no man to wake him as Commander Crawford had before, but William would find a way to get his deliciously calm mornings in his grasp once again.

He made a soft groan swinging his legs over the bed, realising he was still fitted in a military issued pair of breeches as well as his underthings. So blissfully drunk the previous night, the stiff fabric had no hindrance on his sleep. He had though shucked off his boots, medics coat, and a small pin he had that identified his legion. He gave himself small praise for that at least. He pattered his bare feet to the necessarium, complete with a chamberpot, basin tub, and a desk fitted with a mirror glass pane. On the escritoire he saw a mystifying assortment of oils and bath dressings. A small blade for shaving was also present, which William was immensely grateful for.

William relieved himself, deciding to stoke a fire as he would like to bathe and shave. He came upon the parlour, kneeling before the fireplace. He made quick work of the fire as the Blooms graciously supplied him with everything necessary. This was second nature to William. He gathered two large pails and went to the well, just a few paces from the cottage, to gather water. He hoped no one could see him shirtless and shoeless from the palace. How indecent, what a scene that would be. He tickled himself with the notion.

Gathering up the heavy buckets, which weigh down his barren arms. He heads back for his new home. He hanged the bucked from a bar installed inside the base of the fire nook. While they heated, William ventured to his pantries, complete with a stone hearth where he could prepare meals and tea for himself. Curiously, this morning he fancied a cup of coffee. He opened his cupboards, a plentiful bounty of fruits and vegetables, breads and grains, seasonings and spices, broths and ales. Furthermore, there was a special cupboard with salted and brined meat as a preservation matter. Will decided it was best to make his beverage after his bath, besides he really only ventured to the pantries to pass a few moments.

The water was hot and steaming in their respective buckets, adding a comforting humidity to his winter dried home. He arranged his pails, careful to grasp it by the wooden spools and not the thin silverish metal, knowing well enough it would leave some grotesque blisters had he not known better. He walked gracefully so as not to slosh around any liquid about.

William dumped the steamy water into the basin. He stalked his shaving desk picking a sweet black current fragrant soap. He poured some oils in the basin before disrobing fully. He felt a chill down his spine now being fully exposed to the air. He dipped his toe in the velvet liquid, delving his whole foot, then shin, and finally he fully stepped in. He sank down letting his body submerge. The heat overtook him as he closed his eyes. Mindlessly he grabbed the soap

and began rubbing it into its skin, sinking his fingers into his muscles. A dull ache remained from riding in from the base yesterday.

The pads of his fingertips worked the muscles of his lower back. Pressing into the two pressure points just beside the base of his spine. He groaned and moved his hands to the tops of his thighs. Kneading inwards, the pains began to subside as his fingers reached where he was sorest. He softly ran his digits over his innermost thighs, slowly moving up toward his groyne. Mewing softly, he couldn't help himself but run his fingers along his length. The base of William's neck connected with the copper basin. He properly moaned now adding more pressure, setting a rhythm as he stiffened.

He couldn't even pass blame upon himself. He spent years sharing a tent with multiple men never giving himself the time to take care of his needs, The moments his sweet pilgrim hands trailed along his nether was whilst bathing and even then the fear of someone stepping in to interrupt him left his hands halting, skipping, leaving him always yearning even when his dam eventually ruptured . He had never lain with man nor women. The strenuous work of an alley cat did not extend to seducing bedfellows. Despite his inexperience, he did not feel as though he was lacking the grace of skin and heat against his own or befuddled about his attraction and to just what sex it was directed at. William knew himself, every inch, Inside his own mind's quarters and on his body's flesh. No dagger of mind that holds sharp secrets, that held William in liplock. No, William was far too solus in said mind quarters to dissimulate his heart's desires.

William’s threatening choke quickened in pace. His mind did not stray, did not dally, solely focused on the completion of his own incompleteness. Dull aches of fervour unrequited by imagination. William believed that he did not need to tip his minds’ chalice on something so impure nor did his memory find any willing subjects that would inspire without guilt or advantage taken on such beauty that is his fellow man without being previously intimate.

He sputtered and plashed about as his body jerked. Intense heat building stretching itself thinner and thinner. His left hand gripped the copper and his right hand began to deafen all Williams senses, save his firelit sense of touch. All melted away as he arched into his grip. Even the sweet smell of blackcurrant was fading fast into the strictly idiosyncratic scent of his arousal.

He was ravished and reeling. He heaved up giving a quickening pace that left him completely forsaken. Pure white, as if reborn, baptised in his copper basin, was bright behind his cinched eyelids, His hand slightly slackened as his seed spilled over his knuckles. Reborn in blackcurrant stirred with white strokes of semen, It was certainly blasphemous but strike good William down if it hadn't been the best undoing he'd ever crafted.

He sighed knowing he couldn't sit in the tub much longer. He hauled his wet, dripping, and spent body out of the tub. He had linen cloths in the drawer of the shaving escritoire he'd inspected earlier. Hastily he dried himself and wrapped the towel over his groyne and thighs. He sat in his escritoire. Upon examination he was a little worse for wear. Grasping the blade, he wet his face with tub water and began his gentle work. The upkeep was tedious but quick. He almost completed the task perfectly until his sharp blade pierced a nick on his cheek bone.

It bled but only just so, no harm done on the whole. His eyes softened at the updated appearance. The pierce was well worth the feeling of his smooth face unperturbed.

William leaves the necessarium to clothe his bare body. He opened the chest which held several drawers. In the top drawer were collars, cravats, and underthings. In the second drawer, shirts of various styles and colours that were fashionable for the season and several rolled up ribbon neck ties which William much preferred to the collars of the previous drawer. He spied a crimson velvet ribbon which he admired the most, and planned to save it for a day in which he wished to impress. The third drawer held boothose, stockings, garters, and breeches

In the standing wardrobe held coats, waistcoats, overskirts, and several robes. William selected white underthings with billowing sleeves and a frilled neck piece, A brown pair of breeches and standard boothose that would be hidden under his tall dark brown boots, a blue waistcoat with wide buttonholes, and lastly a brown overcoat. He adorned his body in fabrics worth more than his head, and pondered his foreign appearance in his mirror glass, deciding he was welcomely attractive in this garb.

William had made himself some coffee and stoked his fire. He settled with an incomplete sketch disrupted by a rap at his door. He wondered curiously before opening, Greeted by good nurse Katz's lovely face.

“Good day Sir William,” she smiles sweetly which is returned absent mindedly. “I have brought us lunch and would like to take it with you.” She gives no option only the thin veil as if she had so. William did not mind, for her.

“Please Come, Good nurse, The fire is stoked and I wouldn't wish you fall ill to the whims of mother nature.” William opens the door wider. He scooped the wicker basket from her arms and ushered her to the small two man table in the parlour, setting the basket in the centre before claiming the seat opposite his friend.

“I dare say, Your appearance sends charms through me William,” She flirts and waves her hands while she talks. She began to open the cloth covering what seemed to be bread rolls and various fruits, under a second layer of cloth there was a pouch of nuts and a sealed pitcher of wine. She pecked at some of the nuts still admiring Will while she wavered her eyes from the pitcher to Will's features.

“You'll force my cheeks to flush if you don't cease your eyes.” He laughs to himself, tearing at the roll. “I'll acquire some vessels for our wine.” He slipped into the pantry quickly, he snatched some cups and made his exit. He rejoined her, dishing out the port.

“I cannot lie, I came here with intention.” Nurse Katz began, “I thought it best to tell you Lady Alana's taken interest in you, Now-” she was cut off.

“I had my suspicions. Honestly I hate to let the fair lady down but we are two very different breeds that share the same species. I could not fulfil those desires her and her father's wish of me.” he says earnestly but not exasperatedly. “She is infatuated by the prospect of someone new, I doubt she is truly taken with me.” He eats some nuts and swigs the wine.

“Don't be such a fool, It is but an interest. Besides she only wishes to lay and marry to please the lord. It is not of her own volition.” Nurse so expertly emasculates his woes, cutting him down to the size she feels fit. William can't help but smile.

“So how do I approach the situation?” William caved. Knowing whatever advice she gave was better than his own protocol

“I would advise you to continue with your friendly demeanour. Her fancy will pass as you develop a friendship, I believe.” She picked grapes, popping them into her mouth. “Besides she didn't ask you to court her to the ball which is a great sign.”

William did say a silent prayer that she hadn't, not sure he would've been able to turn her away. “What if she was just waiting til our branch of friendship was shared?” A fair enough possibility. He was worried and not sure the good nurse would be able to relieve his plagues of thought.

“She may ask for a dance, but she is not so brazen to ask for accompaniment, I assure.” She drank so flippantly, Clearly as unconcerned as a morning dove. He sighed, continuing to pick at the delicious food she provided.

When left with his thought and the silent visage of nurse eating, he pondered his accepted invitation to the gala. Perhaps he'd made a mistake. He would play through scenarios in his mind, Alana would call upon him to dance with her, which he would completely blunder through as he had never been taught such art. He would apologise and scurry away, embarrassed. Perhaps here is where he'd find his wise old apprentice, time faded with a beard and old style robes. His face in William's mind's eye would be withered and whimsical. He would be jaded and displeased with William's naive abilities. The thought nearly posed his lips to ask if he could take back his promise of attendance, knowing far too well he could not.

“You've left me in silence for far too long, If it wasn't for the crackle of your fire I would've gone mad.” Nurse sat back crossing her arms over her apron.

“It does not surprise me you have not accompanied yourself with silence.” He laughed himself away from his broken thoughts.

“I find conversation much more intriguing. Now do tell, what's eating you my friend?” She said softly. William knew she was genuinely interested.

“I am worried about how my solstice will fare. Tell me, have you met the man I will be introduced to…By your direct action may I add?” Referencing her need to share his hobbies to the Lord.

“I have made his acquaintance once before, Having painting his subjects in his own studio. He only made a Palace call singularly,” she began, eyes lit with recollection. “When Lady Alana was the eve of 16, She fell very ill, a coughing disease of the lungs. The whole palace was simply crestfallen at her worsening condition. When the painter heard of her condition he told the king to let him paint her in case this would be her last. He promised the Lord he would paint her beautifully but he noted that her sickness would be present in the painting. The Lord was apprehensive, not wanting to remember his daughter in such a manner but he

simply insisted. By weeks out he was in her chamber painting her bedridden.” She took a second before continuing.

“The man was handsome, and from an unknown land. He was a hand older than you are now back then. Kind and very eloquent. Though I didn't see him much, he was exceedingly well mannered.” Nurse smiled a grin of fondness. “Miraculously, almost as soon as her portrait reached completion she was recovering, In better condition than she had in weeks. Up and about in mere hours after the man left. Hmm, He was a count in his home country so the Lord referred to him as Count. I cannot place his name… I had known it if you had not asked.” she laughed. William pondered over all the bits he'd just received. He cannot be as miraculous as he was made out to be. He believed it too tall to be true.

“How long has he been in the Lord's contact?” William asked.

“My services to the king began just 2 years before Lady Alana's sickness and ever since I'd been there so had he. The time before I can not speak of.” She began wrapping up the food remnants in the cloth. “ I really do have to return to my duties. If you seek more about the man you should go to the gallery in the palace and acquaint him through his work.” He stood grasping her basket. Will stood with her, noticing the pitcher on the table.

“You've forgotten your wine, My lady.” He goes to grasp it as the nurse places a hand at his wrist.

“To keep you company.” She swiftly turns to the door. William smiles and opens it for her.

“Good day, Miss Katz.” he nods at her as she slips out of the entryway. She threw a smile back to him,

“And you as well, Sir Graham.” He watched her trail up as he slowly shut the door. He thought about her suggestion. Perhaps he would venture to the palace after their supper had been served so as not to get invited to dine. He would not like to make a habit of the intrusion. The Lord and lady Alana may take him as interested. Nurse said it was a means to please her father and not to please herself, William wondered if Alana knew that herself. Perhaps the sharp dagger of mind was that she had known that and did not accept it.

Lady Alanah was so exceedingly youthful in flesh and demeanour toward affection, Blushing at the notion of a man’s interest as opposed to the poised flattery women of her age were so accustomed to. It was refreshing and most men would think him a fool not to marry the noblewoman. In truth, he felt drawn to her, easily attracted to her flesh but the lifestyle she demanded was not William’s to partake in. William was a simple man who preferred to not reinvent the wheel. The life he led was perfectly considerable for the rest of his years. He required no further whims or fancies. As a man of faith he believed the life he led was in God's image and without any lavish or gluttonous satiation to corrupt his journey through life.

His whims with God were as simple as he was a believer in the fact his purpose was to live his life with a good heart and intention. He drew scenes for him and prayed. His visits to church have been non-existent since joining the legion. He should start, maybe he will ask the Lord which church he should attend.

He settled in his own settee in front of the fireplace, taking up the discarded sketch once again. His fingers worked over the page feverishly. Making slight work of the sketch, he poured himself into the book heart blooming with emotion as he did. His breath and body were enraptured in his work, William's passion could feed his desire and cure any ailments of the mind, although tonight neither plagued him. He was quite fulfilled having learned more about both Lady Alana and the man penned as the Count. The sketch took the shape of a nude soldier who had posed for him, A Sir Matthew Brown. The soldier was taken with William, as he recalls it. Brown found himself in need of trending, wrapping and suturing weekly, all at the hands of WillIam. He knew of the medic's abilities and offered to pose. William could not let the opportunity pass him and so he accepted.

William did not let his eyes ponder than man's form, save necessity. In fact he cut the endeavour short, committing the rest to memory for another time.

This time. He worked viciously. William sought such beauty in the form. On the page a man hardened from battle perched delicately in a way as to seduce his medic. William did not mind, the better to show passion, juxtaposition from the man's soldier facade.

William found himself closing upon completion of his muse. The final piece was the soldier's manhood, It was only now William's memory assessed the man's pride. It was alert, not at full mass but certainly half-mass at least. Had William taken care to notice in the moment perhaps he would have been blushing, too unfocused to even commit the form to paper, but alas William sat sketching man's privates sterilely as not to disrespect the muse.

William finished up, putting away his utensils and sketchbook, he stoked the fire so that when he made his leave to the palace it would keep his home warm. William cleaned up and drank one final glass of wine before stuffing the little book in his pocket and setting off. His lantern was illuminating his stoop while shutting the heavy door. He took off on his way enjoying the brisk wind on his face having accustomed himself to the throws of weather. Dusk was upon the horizon and the moon was in pale view. He knew by the time he returned to his home the fire embers would be the only source of light to guide him about.

Sounds of chirps and rustling leaves kept him company as he made his way up, having reached the courtyards. His pace slowed in account of the beautiful gardens. The lawn paled in comparison to the courtyards. He hoped he could take some time to draw here, imagining the beauty that must be present when the ground was warmed and the flowers bloomed. How pretty insects and fluttery winged creatures will whirl about overhead. The scene warmed his heart and pulled at his lips.

He walked up the pristine stairs up to the back exit of the palace. He was greeted by a servant who bowed to him before opening the doors for him. William would generally feel very uncomfortable with such easy tasks being done for him, but he knows it would be rude to insist on setting himself apart. In turn he would be shaming the family who had shown him nothing but kindness and hospitality.

WIllam Entered the lavish residence and asked the servant to direct him toward the galleries. The servant smiled warmly, "I will assist you there, Sir Graham." The man led William through the halls of high ceilinged, grandiose palace, Windows and framed art works outstretched high above his head. The wood carvings were ornate and consistent throughout

the home. The walls were accented with intricate dark brown neutral painting with gold accents. The ceiling was contrastingly light, just as intricately moulded in an eggshell beige. Williams' heart came to appreciate the beauty regardless of his beliefs that it was inherently gluttonous. The chandelier's lit candles added a romantic warth to the home, reflecting off the framed mirror glass.

They reached a set of doors. The servant grasped the gilded handles of the double doors and entered before Wiliam to hold them open for him. He bowed to William as they passed and lingered no longer. William could see the gallery was more like another hallway, frames laced along the long walls that stretched on and on. There were 2 other little rooms off the long rectangular gallery. There were stools every few paces on either side of the walls to sit and admire. William knew far too well that there were many more painters showcased in this collection than just his mysterious Count. Identifying his work off of hunch alone would prove to be daunting but William was more than content as he came with intent to introduce himself and had he had a tip off his introduction wouldn't have been as pure. On first glance he wouldn't know, it would take familiarity. He would learn to pick out the Counts' work at first glance with time. For now he's hoping to at least find one, that he could say was the Counts with certainty.

William had no way to rule any of the paintings out. He felt that there was no time like present to set on the tedious task as the sun was now down and the room was lit by candle light solely. There were so many hanging chandeliers and sconces that the room was still brilliant. He sat in the very first stool and trained his eyes on the gallery wall. As William had suspected there were varying types of portraits and subject matter. There were mythological paintings, still life paintings, family portraits, and biblical paintings among others. He was enraptured, tending to each and every painting. Some stuck out to William but he felt he needed to continue to familiarise with more before he could make any conclusions. He continued now 6 stools from the door, completely carried away in the gorgeous art. He sought out patterns to help him identify the Count.

So far he'd gathered that one painter, whether he be the count or some other in the Lords commission, had enthralled William. He was so drawn to the deep tenebristic style of this artist that he found himself standing inches near the art fingertips ghosting over but never touching. He never remembered standing from his stool. He knew this was the same person each time because he painted with such deep shadows, of the likes of Caravaggio, but somehow deeper. There were these deep rich colours completely bled from the canvas. In particular the flesh tones were unique, He couldn't describe it. They were so alive. The flush of skin and lively colour was so realistic, so unheard, so unseen to William before. The eyes glistened with wetness, the fingers graceful and perfectly blushed and veined. He felt these paintings. They moved and breathed and lived. It was like the mirror glass in the hallway was freezed on its subject and perfectly portrayed its likeness. The deep tenebrism gave each piece intensity of different shades. Some shades were that of curiosity, humanity, enthusiasm, grace, beauty, envy, rage, greed, and among others, sadness. Each captured so purely, so accurately.

William was now on his 8th stool, And he was just as captured having fallen prey to this glorious painter. The whole room was lost upon him save this man's work. He saw themes of mythology ever present in his work. He almost always alluded to a tale, Even his royal

portraits gave allusion. His favourite thus far was a portrait of a man, Silvery brown hair straight and cropped to the usual length for a man, His skin was tanned and aged to what William would assume somewhere between 30 to 40 years of age. He was beautiful, his eyes were deeply maroon and filled with emotion. He was painted as Dionysus, holding a glass chalice of red wine, as customary. He bared a white toga that only covered one shoulder and stretched diagonally around his chest. One pectoral visible, a tanned muscular chest partial in view. His head was tilted to expose an expanse of neck. The figure was surrounded by wine and grapes as well as beautiful vines and leaves.

William couldn't help himself, his fingers itched to touch. He grazed the neck of the figure, down over the collarbones, then the pectoral, then resting finally just right to the bare painted forearm. He was so lost to the world that his breathing stopped. His blinking slowed. Nothing was important except appreciating the art before him. The muse was an unusual pick for Dionysus, generally the god was depicted as a younger, fleshier man to represent his power of fertility. William was in awe of the muse he found the model perfect and perhaps Dionysus's youth was best displayed in the ability to be as beautiful in a more ripened age.

William's eyes scanned every detail, Even the fine tufts of hair that grew from the exposed chest of the man was committed to William's memory. The drapery of the toga, the curve and thrash of vines, even the wisps of sweeping lashes over the man's lax eyes. William's chalice was so overflown with inspiration, with desire to be better, to practise. It ate at him. Gnawing at every centimetre of William's flesh.

If this painter was not to be his master he wasn't sure he could bite back his adoration and perhaps he would offend whoever truly was to be his tutor by wanting to be taught how to paint in this manner. None of the other artists adorning the walls held a candle to him.

"That's him, you know,"

William's head snapped back, startled. There stood Lady Margot, arms crossed over her chest clearly amused. William shook his head before stammering back and removing his hand from the god. He sputtered, feeling as though he'd just awaken. He looked between her and the art.

"The man the Lord wants you to meet, that's him." she gestured to the artwork. William's chest bloomed.

"He's the one who painted that?" William could not help the joy lacing his voice. The artist had found him, sought him out through his work.

"Indeed, but that is also himself in the painting." She comes to stand beside will, admiring the artwork.

"A self portrait?" William was bewildered. The model who he was so taken with was also the painter who stuck something so deep within him. "He is beautiful…I-I mean it's beautiful, the way he paints." He was clumsy with his own words. A flush creeped up his neck as his eyes shifted between her and the portrait.

“I assure you he is the best painter i've ever had the joy of witnessing, He is quite comely as well.” Disregarding William’s ‘mistaken’ words. “He's a unique sort, One of him only in existence. I hope you don't find me rude but I am curious to see how you will fare under his order. I imagine it to the likings of Hades teaching a human to hone the underworld.” William was not offended. This man was like no other and his abilities seem inhospitable for someone so slight as himself. “There are quite a few who know the man but many ghost stories regarding him. Far too many to be true.”

“Do you know of any?” He asked wanting to know what they say of him.

“Only one,” She began. “Worthy of passing along anyway.”William led her by the arm to the stool where they sat side by side, angled toward each other. “It is commonly known the Count is a foreign man but only few know from where he originates. It is said his art is years beyond his age. Some believe there was an artist before him that was very old before passing along his ability to the Count. The more respected tale as there are passages reporting paintings from 100 years ago of his unique abilities. Impossible to be of his own hand.” She explains lowering her voice.

“Although some believe that it was him. That he had not aged but slight since he arrived in Florence and before that no one knows.” She says straight faced. William could not imagine how a man could not age. How could a man have been over a century old and look but under 40. William knew this must just be a tale. He must've learned from whomever painted the paintings in said reports. “Tis but a ghost story, and he is an easy target for them. He is rarely seen, pent up in his studio and only ever graced upon the Lord's calling. I suspect he just is consumed with his practice, perhaps maddened with it” She states very plainly. William listened and digested but he felt called to by the art, his eyes flicked to the paintings while she talked and only pulled away to be polite. “The solstice will be the first I've seen of him in years as the portraits are always painted in his own studio.”

“Do you think he would take an apprentice?” He asks genuinely, now worried he would refuse William.

Margot placed a hand on his knee, “He is a kind, just man, I suppose if he takes a liking to your company he just might.” She smiles at him. Will had not expected such warmth from her after their first meeting. Will still saw the lingering sadness in her eyes. She was so filled with emotion and William was concerned for her but he knew not to cross any line. He just wanted to get to know her better, to care for her.

“Lady Margot,” He began, She hummed in response. “I would like to be your acquaintance, I have enjoyed our shared time together.” He smiled toward her.

“Sir William, I am pleased to make your acquaintance.” She says simply with a smile before standing. She began down the hall toward the entrance. “Don't stay here too long, They may start talking.” She teases and William flashes her a toothy smile.

“Goodnight madam.” He says breathily.

“Goodnight, Sir” She slips out and wills eyes leave the door to trail back to the man before him.

He sat and stared, studying the artwork. He pulled out his sketchbook and started committing the god to his own paper. He drew with so much fervour and ferocity that his fingers began to ache but his pace did not slow. He choked upon the neck of his pencil, he couldn't help himself. William knew his artwork would pale to the painting but he just needed his own copy. He needed the painting to be so deeply connected to him that when he closed his eyes it would be there. He had never had such urges for any subject before. It dizzied him. William could make no sense of it. His heart simply desired it and he could not tell himself no.

He sat on the little stool drawing for hours but they passed like mere seconds. When he had finished his beautiful god he moved to another painting of his, a model posing as hermes,just as beautifully captivating as all of his work but there was something about his own Dionysus that when will had finished sketching 2 other works of his Count's, he circled back to the wine god to do another rendition this time his bust alone. He savoured every detail and as dawn broke he was still not shaken of his trance.

Beverly found him and practically dragged him out to take servants breakfast with her. Although his mind never left the Count.

Chapter 3

William was stuffy, stiff even. Laden in a fancy overcoat, gold ropes embroidered and hung from the thick crimson fabric. As he had promised himself, he bore the thick velvet ribbon tied around his collar. He wasn't accustomed to such indulgent fabrics. It was a gift from the Lord's tailor. William had mentioned something to Nurse Katz about his lack of lavish dressings, he assumed she must've passed that tid bit along to the Lord or Lady Alana. The tailor had visited him just 3 days prior. He was a skinny lad with unremarkable features. As he measured William, he informed him that the king had passed along the notion of William taking up with the Count as his apprentice. The tailor told him that he also tailored for the Count.

‘You know, he's brilliant. He's a chef, a musician, a poet, a sculptor, and most notably, as you’re aware, he is the best artist I believe I’ve ever beheld… He's very particular about his clothing. I hope you don't mind me suggesting but, If you'd like to make an impression I have a style and colour that will certainly impress the Count.’

William’s mind stretched over the man's words, over and over. Waxing and waning. He was catered to the Master Painter. Moreover, He would be served up to the man, a gift regarded in a velvety blood red neck ribbon.

He fidgeted, feeling exposed. While he was well trained in the leigon, William was an unintentionally brash man. Many would regard him as rude. William knew the sophisticated man to whom he would be presented would be the picture of grace and civility and it frightened him.

He shifted, standing from the 8th stool down from the entrance of the gallery. The same stool he sat at, for some period of time or another, everyday for the past 6 days since his first interaction with the beautiful Dionysus. He’d made a little routine for himself: Wake up, stoke the fire, bathe, dress, have his first meal, complete any odd tasks, make his way to the palace with his sketchbook, Draw the beautiful muses, Take servants lunch with Miss Katz, Journey home.

Some days he would postpone his home coming for more time to study the art which ensnared and encapsulated his body and mind. Today, mere hours til the festivities were to begin, he drew one of the Masters’ few biblical pieces, The Binding of Isaac. William knew the story very well, God bid Abraham to evince his devotion by making a 3 day journey to Moriah, where Abraham crafted an alter and bound his beloved son to firewood, he rose his dagger to slay his son in sacrifice and an angel called to him that he needn't slay his son, His devotion was evident and a ram had been incidentally slain in Isaacs place.

William always believed the story was such a beautiful depiction of God's mercy. He dutifully committed the piece to fine paper. As he came to finish he realised he inserted himself in the scene. He had inadvertently drawn himself as Abraham, mid downswing of the dagger, an angel in the clouds clutching his left arm to stop the sacrifice. His son’s turned

face obstructed from view to show him fathers compassion. Tears glinting in Williams' (Abrahams') eyes.

He didn't ponder over the self insertion, he simply feverishly shades the last of the values necessary to satisfy his vision. He knew he'd be expected soon, there was simply something so tempting about the Counts' muses. William lost himself…or perhaps found himself in the beauty. He felt as though he knew the man who was completely enigmatic. William, in reality, knew the man no better than he knew a stranger, but he felt him. William so tangibly felt his presence in the artwork as he felt thick impasto brush strokes when his fingers itched to graze the work itself.

The older man's talent had impacted William in ways he never expected. He couldn't shake the all consuming theories about the mysterious artist. He often found himself glazing back over Dionysus, both his own renditions and the original. He would stare at the man with some undiscovered curiosity. He wasn't sure if it was just the mystery of it all, or something else. All he recognized was the overarching need to study the self portrait.

William crossed his leg over top of his other, closing the red leather book and tying up the attached strap of the same material. A sigh of nervous tension slipped past his lips. His eyes landed on dark maroon eyes, still and flat but so full of life. A reassuring warmth spread through his body. Even if this didn't work out, nothing could tarnish what he felt for the man's artwork. William had to face the man whom he was staring at, whom he had been staring at for a week, in mere minutes.

William stood, body still rigid in the clothes he adorned, He took a few steps toward the opposing wall where beautiful art tracked him. His hands had tucked themselves and the book in his pockets when he stood but as he approached the wall his hands subconsciously freed themselves from the cloth confines and snaked themselves under his elbows as he crossed his arms. His eyes bore into the unwavering maroon pools.

"Oh how I admire you," he whispered to the painting, letting his hand caress the man's cheek. "How I hope to admire your creator as well." William lingered only a second longer before slipping out of the gallery.

William spotted Nurse Katz piddling about, she was humming to herself cheerily and carrying a vessel of what William could only assume to be wine. She swayed to the music of the small orchestra of instrument players the king had commissioned. The sounds trickled in distantly. William approached the good nurse.

"I must confess, the confines of my mind are not at ease. I do not know how he will take to me, Miss Katz." his head was tilted to the floor. He was not ashamed, rather uncomfortable with the intimacy of the confession. He needn't be though, he had shared more with Nurse Katz than any other person in Florence, save a particular painting whom he had taken conversation with far more frequently than just tonight.

"Oh my dear, There is not a question in my mind he will at least entertain the notion. I may not know the man, but what I do know about him provides me with a sufficient portrait of decorous chivalry." She smiled warmly and clasped his forearm with reassurance. "You must

be on your way, tardiness may affect how you fare." It was more of a delightful quip rather than a serious notion.

"I will join them if you promise to pull me away if I should need such rescuing." Placid seriousness painted Williams face.

"Fine, Fine, But you must make an effort. You are a guest of honour after all." She pats him along and points him to the ballroom.

His feet pulled along but not under the reins of his brain, for his consciousness was still in the gallery, and the courtyard, and in his basin. Safe and sound. Secluded.

The doors were pulled open and held in position by two exceedingly well dressed servants. They both bowed in synchrony to William. As he entered the envelope of warm spirits, cheery music, and a small flood of decorated bodies he felt slightly less stressed. He anticipated the simple act of showing up so much that when he actually had, in the crowd, he was mostly unnoticed.

The room was a large circle complete with cylindrical columns adorning the outermost edges of the room as if the room were a clock and the columns were the time indicators. The room was so immense that the small orchestra played in the centre stage just to ensure the compositions would be heard throughout the room. There had to be in the very least 200 people in attendance, they fit quite comfortably. William flagged a servant whom he'd met while taking lunch with Miss Katz named Randall Tier. He was a quiet man but on the whole pleasant. He often took his quite carnivorous lunch with such ferocity, William actually thought he might have been starved but Nurse Katz informed William he was simply a man of beastly nature. This affliction did not bleed into his servantry, he did his job gracefully with reserve.

William intended to refer to him as Sir Randall (or perhaps Sir Tier), out of respect as he saw him no different than any other being in the palace but Randall insisted he call him, informally, just Randall. William obliged as it seemed to be more respectful than denying him simply out of his own concept of respect and obligation.

Randall offered William a toothy smile, it had a bite to it. It always did.

"Where's the mead, heaven knows I shouldn't resort to functioning of my own volition." William's true nature was much more akin to how he spoke to Randall in this moment. He wasn't a gentle, polite man but for his Lord sake he would portray himself that way. It was nice with Randall, they offered each other their true apparitions.

Randall snidely laughed at the man so desperate before him,"I'm half tempted to withhold that information William. It would delight me to no end to see you piss your chances. What a show that would be for me." He nudged him with his shoulder.

William found him to be such a delightful prat. Rude in all the right ways to offer some equality of social standing. "Perhaps, I might be so sober I accidentally let some choice information slip to our good nurse about a beastly servant who is quite taken with her. After

all I must distract myself somehow from this soiree and what better way than blooming affection between friends of mine."

"Well played. Unfortunately I would have to disembowel you if that were the case. I would rather like to keep my job and it certainly wouldn't do if the lord's ward was eviscerated." His smile somehow became more inhuman as he pointed William to the opposite side of the room where servants carried trays of different delectables and one tray in particular caught his eye, it balanced a dozen or so glasses of mead.

"I would quite like to keep my internals, internal. Thank you Randall, I'll catch up to you in a bit." William patted the man's shoulder and set off in the direction of his saving grace, his escapism elixir.

He grasped two of the glasses while the servant's back was turned. He downed the first in a burning gulp and placed the empty glass back on the tray. He swifty walked to one of the pillars with his other glass still full. He leaned on the cold marble and stared out into the small sea. He observed them, their pretentious fake niceties and belly full fake laughs. It didn't bother William necessarily. He simply thought it curious how far they were willing to go. Had they ingrained this behaviour so deeply that it seemed to become their nature?

He could not pass any judgement, as he himself was in actuality a shrewd man who played up his manners for the Lord. He always reverted to his own distinct nature regardless. For instance, his greedy desire that took him in the bath and led him back to the galleries every day. It seems these people have convinced themselves this is their truth.

Will stood slowly sipping his mead, observing for several minutes. He knew eventually the lord or Lady Alanah would sniff him out. He hoped the swathe of bodies would keep him camouflaged for at least a few more sets by the orchestra. He wondered if he could spot them, surely ornate and crowded wherever they resided in the room. His eyes scanned over many small collectives of people. He did not upon first search reveal any members of nobility.

He took a large mouthful of wine and pulled himself off the column and instead walked toward the head of the ball room and leaned against the column that would be at 12 had this truly been a clock. The vantage was much better here. As expected his eyes easily spotted the exceptional Lady Alanah. She was truly ravishing tonight. Her dress was full and draping. The deep plum contrasted beautifully against the ivory skin she bore. Her hair was up and styled elegantly atop the crown of her head. Tonight she wore a tiara and precious jewels. She looked like a princess. William always admired her beauty but the admiration lacked any lust.

They made eye contact and he cursed himself for inspecting her, she must've felt his gaze. She smiled brightly and waved him over. William mustered a smile back before slowly descending from his perch to join her. He was filled with anxiety that was weakly lessened with alcohol. As he made his descent he downed his second cup and grabbed yet another off a passing tray and quickly placed the old cup on it. He took a swig before finally making Lady Alana's acquaintance. He bowed down to her mead in front of his belly and his free hand behind his back. He straightened with a polite, albeit toothless, smile.

"You look lovely, Madame." William tilted his head in a nod.

“As do you, Sir Graham. I do not believe I've seen you in red before” She gestured her glassless hand toward his garb. “It's quite magnificent I would say. I hoped that my father would send you a talented tailor, I'm relieved to see he had.” She smiled sweetly, cheeks tinted in a flush as they so often were.

“He was very accommodating, He suggested the colour actually, the style as well… I am not up to date on fashions but you must tell me how I fared.” William was actually digging to see if he was actually catered for the Count. He was not sure if Lady Alana would even know that information as she knew him only so much.

“They're actually more of an older, sophisticated style of clothing. Very aristocratic. They look very distinguished.” He registered that as a compliment, if anything it did seem as though it would leave a respectable impression on anyone so whether that meant the style the tailor was suggesting was just an overall sensible outfit or if it was specifically tuned to the older man's tastes, William was perfectly content with it.

“I must be honest, My Lady,” He leaned into her as to whisper, “I am a man of simple style, had I dressed myself I would have shown up in my medics coat.” He made a small snicker. She returned the laugh with a small snort and she quickly covered her mouth. Her face paralleled William’s overcoat in colour.

“You'll have to forgive me, father insisted when I found you I should bring you to the Count.” She nodded at him to stand beside her. William held out his arm for her and they linked as she led him to the pillar that rested at what would be 9, Just behind it angled an easel and canvas and a side table of paints and brushes. The stool sat vacant behind the easel.

“He must be out charming the crowd, that's his specialty. For such a recluse, He's certainly charismatic.” She unhooked her arm and sipped the wine in her glass. “I have yet to meet someone who finds him disagreeable.”

“I am more concerned about his taking to me, I admit” Will bowed his head sheepishly. He brought his mead to his lips and took quite the swig. He met her considering eyes again after swallowing. She placed a kind hand on his forearm.

“Would you like me to stay and wait with you, I can introduce you when he returns if you wish.” She truly meant it. She would put her jubilations on hold to ease the man's fears. William could never let her do that for him though.

“Do not worry about me, tis jitters. Nothing to concern yourself with, My Lady.” William smiled in reassurance. He took care to seem convincing.

“Only if you're sure.” William gave her a swift nod.

“I promise” He proclaimed with an air of false confidence. She gave him a squeeze where her hand embraced him and turned back to the crowd leaving William to his own devices.

The mead had started to swirl in his head. He was dizzy by his last sip. Still no appearance of the mysterious painter. William sat in the stool to steady himself and pondered over the man. Naturally that resorted him to pulling out the book that matched his wardrobe so nicely

tonight. He flickered through the book to a page that contained one of the renditions of the Counts Dionysus. His fingers mirrored the actions they took on the canvas just an hour or so ago, Grazing the cheek then the exposed neck. It comforted him. Grounded him.

Although he knew whatever that painter was truly like, he would not let it interfere with the relationship he had with the man's artwork, he still hoped he could freeze this moment seeing his Dionysus as he had now. Unperturbed by the realm of reality, simply a beautiful god of wine.
William flipped to his drawing of The Binding of Isaac, He studied himself as Abraham. He pulled the pencil from his pocket and etched in the curls that framed his own face in reality. If he was going to insert himself he may as well do it accurately.

His mead soaked brain happily escaped into the drawing, He was hidden behind the large canvas that sat in front of the stool. He had paid no mind to the festivities solely focused on the sombre yet beautiful scene he poured out onto the page. He took liberties with the drawing in ways he couldn't have when he sat in front of the muse. Overall, he kept it very close to the original only embellishing his own self insertion and the angel, Zadkeil, who stops Abraham. Instead of the favoured cherub appearance, William modelled him as a fully fleshed man but not after anyone in particular.

He crossed his leg over like he had when he sat in the 8th stool down earlier. His favoured position when he committed his hands to creation. He worked over the page and his neck ran stiff from the craning.

He splayed his neck up and stretched where he had been hunching over, letting a noise of relief pass his lips. He rolled his shoulders a few times and as he straightened he looked out into the crowd scanning for Dionysus. It was strange he hadn't returned yet. William looked back down at his book and readied his hand to create, but before he did he gave the room one last pass. He couldn't spot him at all, he let out a sigh. He decided to yet again flip to the portrait, a refresher of sorts. His fingers trailed the exposed shoulder this time.

His previous thought that he wished he could freeze him in the portrait suddenly seemed so ludicrous. The man had always been more than Dionysus. He felt it even when he looked into his own sketch. His eyes hungrily pierced the copy. His fingers tracked the curve of thick bicep and down the soft linen creases of the tunic. Beautiful. He swore he could feel the smooth elasticity of the man's skin. The woven folds of fabric. He was thoroughly lulled.

"I find the larger your canvas the more life-like it is when you grasp your muses." William nearly fell out of the stool. A man's accent thick voice poured into his ears like velvet black coffee. He peered up at the man who had been behind his shoulder for some unforeseeable amount of time.

His Bacchus, His Dionysus. He stood with an amused smile playing at his facade. His likeness was a perfect resemblance to his self portrait. Every detail matched the man so perfectly. He was beautiful, truly a man to be painted and passed on forever, infamously, immortally. William's mouth sputtered open and closed as his neck was completely straightened to take in the man's face.

He stood quickly turning to meet him. The Count's gaze tracked him, never leaving the boy's eyes. William's eyes danced all across the vicinity in front of him finding it exceedingly hard to separate the art from the artist. How he wished to splay his fingers over the man's features.

"I'm uh…William," He clumsily spilled out, taking in the mans' polished muscular form. "Graham" He finally said. He met the man's face with his own mouth agape. He was taken aback by the encounter completely. He finally registered to bow to the man. He bent and when he regained some semblance of composure he met the maroon eyes yet again as he had so many times before. They raked over his body and quickly landed back up to his gaze.

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance Mr. Graham. My name is Count Hannibal Lecter the eighth." He smiled at him but did not return a bow. "I would prefer if you referred to me as Count Lecter." He said so curtly yet with such elegance.

"Of course, Count Lecter. I didn't mean to impose. I was simply hoping to greet you and time slipped away from me. I hope you were not observing long" William said with more tooth than expected. He hinted at the uncomfortable nature of being observed without his knowledge. Had he'd been sober he would have held a much tighter rein on his emotions.

Count Lecter held a glint of undisclosed emotion in his eyes. He circled William before taking his spot at the stool. "I too, hope you had not been observing too long, Master Graham" His eyes made their way down to William's left hand with a playful smile as they reached the book held open by the younger man's thumb to reveal his own face. William quickly removed his thumb to shut the book and place it in his pocket. Slightly offended at the notion that the count saw him as a child.

"I draw from the galleries often, Count Lecter." a half truth, he did draw from the galleries but only the works the man before him had painted. He felt like a rodent caught under a predatory view. He was flushed, he could blame the mead if needed."And Mister Graham or William will be quite sufficient." curse his brazen tongue.

"So I've been informed, Lady Alana tells me you spend time there everyday." He says so flippantly yet it feels eerily personal. This was certainly a joust and William was tactfully jabbed.

"Drawing brings clarity, a rest for the mind." He quips but it's useless. Somehow the count infiltrated his brain and knew of the growing compulsion to his work. William could only hope his defences sounded genuine enough to cast doubt in the Counts mind.

"Ah," The man began to sketch on the canvas before him, William leaned his body on the man's side table. "Indulge me, William. How did you feel whilst drawing that particular muse?" The one of me, the one you handled with tender fingers of the drawn bare flesh. WIlliam pondered his response knowing he certainly would not admit to any fascination.

"I thought of how it was an unusual model for Bacchus, that was of course before I learned the model was also the painter." That was certainly true. His sudden switch to his Roman name simply felt more accurate now he's met the foreign man. Although, He was certainly not a Roman man. William could not place his accent's origins.

“That is what you thought William, not what you felt.” Fuck. Yet another jab from the Count.

“I felt that the model was better fit.” William gritted. He hoped he couldn't hear him. After all, the model sat right in front of him and William is telling him he suits the portrayal of a God.

“And why did you feel that way? Out of curiosity.” A cat-like grin met WIlliam’s eyes as Hannibal turned toward him. William looked away staring at his shoes. He mustered any courage left in his mead soaked body. If he was going to be subjected to flattering the man against his will he would be as clinical about it as he could be.

“I felt as though Bacchus’ youthful fertility could be exemplified better in something less on the nose by portraying a man who aged gracefully.” He said even quieter but the pleased noise that hummed from the painter's throat clues him in that he has in fact heard.

“I'm delighted to hear you believe I've aged gracefully.” William wanted to die. Why was the man so politely patronising? He was being flayed open so easily. His brain's desires to openly praise the man were overshadowed by his own pride.

“Did the lord tell you about why he wanted us to be introduced?” He prayed that he had.

“Yes, But I would like to hear you ask me yourself. There's an importance to seeking your own opportunity.” He laid a flat wash of liquid white varnish on his sketched in canvas. William couldn't help but enjoy the man working right before his eyes, that was the only enjoyment he gathered thus far from the interaction, or at least the only enjoyment he let himself confess to. For a man who previously held no daggers of mind, he was certainly dishonest with some very obvious daggers integrating in his mead jellied brain.

“I would like to learn to paint.” (Like You) “If you're looking for an apprentice or a shop hand. I will work for education of course.” He said earnestly. Now he fiddled with his hands and kept his head ducked. Sneaking glances at the man working before him. His muscled body sat with perfect posture and his hands worked with grace and patience unlike William’s. He worked feverishly so overwhelmed with passion he had no control and no pace. The man worked so blissfully yet his control was insurmountable.

“I'm not,” William was bewildered. He said it with a cutting caress of sweet delivery.

“Pardon?”

“I am not looking for an apprentice or a shop hand.” It was honest and cold. William prepared himself for this; he knew this outcome was as likely as any. He let out a sigh and lifted himself off the table to leave him. He felt disheartened, more so than he anticipated.

“Wait,”

William froze mid stride turning to the man yet again. “What?” It was laced with bitterness.

“Model for me, at my shop. After that I'll consider it.” He continued to paint as though the offer held no bearing on him. It simply did not matter to him either way William surmised.

“You want me to model for you?” William was shocked. The man's behaviour was perfectly controlled yet left William feeling completely erratic. This was one outcome William did not anticipate in the slightest.

“Yes, I would.” He said so unabashed. “My offer stands until tomorrow evening. I'll expect an answer by then. I'm staying at the palace tonight so I'll be here when you wish to find me.” William felt like his brain was completely sober and completely jellied in mead all at once. “It's been a pleasure Mr. Graham.” He continued to paint, never stopping to enjoy the stupor he had brought about in William.

“You too, Count Lecter.” What was he to do? He had to find his favoured nurse.This was far too much to carry on his own. He left the interaction with far less clarity of the man. His Bacchus was indeed to be tampered by reality. It was impossible to have one without the other. Count Hannibal Lecter was as much his art as his art was him. William desired to know his art, in turn desiring to know Count Lecter. Although William believed the order of which he desired to know was quite important.

Or perhaps it was yet another dagger of mind.

Chapter 4

“And worse yet, after the refusal, he asked me to model for him!” William absent mindedly paddled around the kitchen. He stopped at the wooden table and drank the wine Nurse Katz graciously supplied him after catching him flustered leaving the ballroom. He had long since removed his cravat and red ribbon which secured it. Such inappropriate behaviour for a gentleman. More specifically, a gentleman in the presence of a lady but little did William care

His hopes to have impressed the man with his dressings were as much of an enigma as man himself. Quite the same could be said about the man's feelings toward William. Never once in Williams years had he cared about another man's opinion of himself. What use is his cravat and ribbon now? Simply to restrain him from comfort and preserve his grace?

“Shall you take him up on it?” She stood with her hands clasped around a vessel of bitterly fragrant coffee. William gave her a look of shock. “I know you are more concerned with the tension of the exchange but I simply must know if you do realise the opportunity could be fruitful, His talents cannot be ceased by a little patronization.” gods sake she was right it wasn't an opportunity given often he was sure.

“Good nurse, He was utterly indifferent to my choice. He is residing here tonight and he instructed me to provide him with an answer before he is to leave.” He began slightly whirling around due to his disposition. Perhaps the alcohol permeated his blood but certainly not his woes. “Count Lecter does not want a shop hand and certainly not an apprentice. He made that quite clear. So, what is he doing stringing me along with this little modelling escapade.” He sat down his wine much harsher than he should have.

Williams nature was fully on display for Miss Katz in this moment but she had seen little glances of it in the time they’d shared and hardly found it disgraceful, truly it made her smile to see such vehement passion. “Perhaps he simply finds you muse worthy.” She, as everyone else, knew William's rustic beauty was not to be overlooked. The nurse was insightful enough to know that he did not view it that way. The man's beauty was lost on himself.

“Pftt, He’d fare better to paint himself again.” It rather fell out of his lips.

“My, my, did you call the Count muse worthy.” She teased in a tone of playful mischief, She had had her suspicions that William was enthralled by the man but she assumed it was to be attributed to the art he produced. She drank from her vessel. “Is this why he has riled you so?”

William was flushed yet again. “I simply meant he has already made such..impressive work in his own image. He needs a muse of my stature as much as he needs an apprentice, yet he offers the opportunity.” He was now planted against a counter with his arms across his chest.

“And only a dunce would forfeit the chance, He even promised consideration of your request while he painted you.” She came closer to mirror his posture on an adjoining counter. He gave her a look of mercy, eyes pleading.

“Miss katz, I fear how I shall keep myself in check. I believe I left a taste just as unsavoury on his tongue as he did mine.” He looked down, his tenor now soft and quiet.

“William, you amused him with your fumbling, you did not offend him.” He found comfort in those words. The painter did seem to be toying with him, playing with his food before consumption like a barn cat. His words held no venom, in fact he was a picture of etiquette however back handed it may have been.

“Beverly…” The first time he has used her given name. It felt strangely fitting. He lifted his eyes to meet hers. She raised her eyebrows waiting for his continuation. He heaved a sigh. Was he really going to admit it?

“I believe I do wish to be his muse.” He was barely above a whisper, as though if he uttered it aloud it would be a palace scandal by dawn.

“I know.” The nurse smiled and approached him. She placed a gentle hand on his chest. William was taken aback by the response. “You cannot fear the prospect he has presented. He will not always play with you so, from his perspective a young man was gingerly grazing a sketch of himself. Can you blame him for such unabashed curiosity?”

“I suppose this would only level the playing field then, He gets to paint me as I drew him. Although I doubt he will be frisking his art as I had.” William said shamefully.

“He is a beautiful, brilliant man. You are allowed to find him as such.” He opened his mouth in protest but she simply patted his chest and left the kitchen. Left with his thoughts he made the only logical choice, drink.

…

William was proper drunk and stumbling into the gallery. It was hours after the ball had ended and most everyone in the palace had retired. He was pleased to find the candles still lit. He did not follow his routine of heading straight to his allocated stool. Instead Willam inspected each and every painting that decorated the walls. He prodded and grazed to his heart's content. He admittedly only prodded the ones that drew him in. Those rich colours, life-like flesh tones, beautiful allegories, it was the count who did it for him. The count that tipped and overflown his proverbial chalice.

When he did finally reach the painting which had caused him a deal of trouble just hours before he still was just as spellbound. The likeness was so uncanny, as though it were painted this very day. He sighed heavily through his half lidded, dazed eyes. He plopped himself onto the stool finding it impossible to go on. His unsteady disposition was no help. William knew it was impractical but he could not help himself from pulling out his book.

He drew absently, his brain long since projected out of his body. He drew Count lecter from memory, adorned in his ornate robes painting at his stool. He was such a comely man. A perfect muse. William tightened his grip on the pencil and the book, almost threateningly so.

He relayed the event of tonight, unable to help himself. He was utterly humiliated. Hannibal Lecter drew from his lips the notion that William found him to have aged with grace…with

beauty. The thought plagued him. Suddenly William felt a streak of anger. The man played him as a fiddle. William, drunk and irrational, threw his book across the room groaning. His posture laxed as his hands drew up to cover his face.

He stood quickly, striding to the portrait that hung pristinely on the wall. He sneered at the man before him. He felt emasculated, Enraged, Like one of those bulls that the Spaniards flashed red silks at.

With a thick air of passion he heaved deep breath into his lungs. His eyes pierced into the painting, the red silk akin to the maroon pools staring back at him. He could do nothing to stop himself, he was at a complete loss. Emotion was the only ruler of his body in the moment. His hand felt the paint atop the canvas, eliciting sparks of fury, of passion. He hovered his face just above Lecters, sneer ever present, He leaned in and kissed the painting. It was hard, lacking the tender sweetness of a lover's touch.

The small canvas gave little comfort and that was what he wanted. The texture of the paint to be ingrained into his pursed lips like a prayer that he would say five times to complete his penance. He drew eyes so tightly. They were squeezed shut. He was so angered that the kiss felt as though he had just punched the man in the mouth. He imagined doing so, a crimson trickle coming from his split lips. He saw the man only smiling back as blood painted his front most teeth. The thought sent a blaze through his chest and down to his loins, which to Williams bemusement, were already alert.

What was he doing, angrily kissing a painting of a man who heckled him so? The man in his thoughts gave him no reaction to such acts of brutality. He simply taunted him.

That didn't matter to him, no logic was to be found in this present moment. Even more so when he drew back and reclaimed the felt cushion he sat at prior. His hand snaked into his breeches hastily pulling himself free. Dazed eyes danced up to the painting and he grew harder without so much as a stroke. He grounded loudly. “Fuck!” It was out of anger and confusion but somehow it only edged him to begin a pace. Images of shoving the man, sparring with him. Leaving them both bloodied as the Count did nothing but look amused.

His absent brain also took his sense of shame. He bore hard into the painting's eyes never leaving it but to close or tilt his head back in ecstasy. He was moaning as though he were some brothel harlot. He would look at the man and imagine his degradation, his smirk, and it got him so impossibly hard, William hated it. He was slutting himself out to a painting. Every principal he held about not relieving himself to people he had not been priorly intimate to was all but gone.

Who was he at this moment? Everything about his sexuality was now deprived, He was moaning, rocking his hips into the stool, all the while his free hand roamed his body. He quickly shucked off his upper half dressings. Williams' chest was completely barren and flushed. His hand felt up his neck, down his pectoral, over his nipple (which earned another whorish sentiment) Down his abdomen to the small patch of hair under his belly button.

His pace was just as ardent as he. His eyes softened as he stared at the man whom he had kissed. It was wanting and needy now. The power imbalance was as it was in the ballroom.

As it was in his minds' sparring match. The two dimensional man before him was very much real and Will was begging him to succumb.

"Please Lecter," it was a whine. His hands were wild. He was absolutely filthy here. He even thought he heard a door open, and when his eyes landed on the unopened, undisturbed door he realised his imagination fabricated it just to further his arousal. The idea of being caught was so painfully delicious to him. Specifically being caught by the object of such fervour. He hated the man who reduced him to such adolescent desire. The man who he, while stroking himself to his image, had expertly severed his innocent admiration of his talent and skill. Absolutely filthy.

He retrained his eyes on the painting. His knuckles nearly white from grip, He milked himself faster than he ever had before. "Yes, yes.." He was so close his eyes shut but he wanted to look at the condescending Count while he came. He huffed, letting out sweet profanities, William opened them and with a rabid pace he spilled all over his fist. He was panting consumed with desire and shock. His eyes lulled in lust broke from the count to assess his state. His loosened fist was painted with warm translucent seed. Clutching his discarded chemise, he cleaned himself off with the undershirt. What the fuck had he just subjected himself to.

Before shucking the stained shirt back on along with the rest of his dressings, he stood completely undone. His breath hung low in his lungs. Heaven forbid this feel as good as it had. He had ruined his delights of simply pleasuring himself without imagining anyone. That was long gone now. His orgasm was too intense, pinned under the gaze of Count Hannibal Lecter. He shook his head of the plaguing thoughts while he redressed.

He needed coffee, and sobriety. He gathered himself and made for the kitchen. He couldn't face the idea of what he had just done, not under these pretences. He feared if he reflected on it with the incapacitated brain he held, he might be lulled into repeating these actions once he regained composure. He had no other choice than to get sobered and leave this gallery immediately.

He secured all of his clothing, disregarding again the cravat and neck ribbon. It was late and he was sure he would not make any unexpected aquaintenses at this hour. William admittedly looked dishevelled. His chamise which exposed his flushed chest adorned a stain which he did his best to cover with the overcoat. His hair and flushed features absolutely gave him away. He looked as though he'd pulled one of the maidens from the ball into a powder room and had his way with her.

He slipped from the gallery, into the corridors clumsily making his way to the kitchen. Once he reached his destination, he prepared his coffee ensuring it would be bitterly strong. He took it with no sweetener, no cream. Simply black and he even procured a bread roll in hopes of diluting the alcohol premeateing his stomach.

As he ate he sat at the servants table where he would take lunch hours from now. The thought caused a groan. His head fell heavy into his hands. He would have to face himself tomorrow, no guise of mead or wine to accompany his shame.

He leaned back into the chair, head hung over, neck exposed, and eyes shut. He stayed like this for several minutes. Occasionally he would incline his neck to sip the black liquid but his eyes remained shut. Minutes dragged over him but he did begin to have a sense of clarity and an even deeper sense of guilt.

As much self depreciation he possessed, the revelations of what he had done in that gallery, how had defiled the god whom he so admired, still elicited a physical reaction. His manhood lay softly stiff against his thigh in his breeches. He wouldn't dare entertain this disgusting behaviour by touching himself, even adjusting its placement was far too much for him. So, he left alone but the swell persisted.

“Good Evening, Master Graham,” The second William translated those words he knew he was absolutely, royally fucked. He opened his eyes but stuck them to the dimly lit ceiling. He couldn't bear to look at the man.

“Count Lecter, I am four and twenty years old, I am not Master Graham...For someone so persistent on what I shall refer to you as you do not seem to care for my proclivities toward my own title.” It was rude. William knew he shouldn't be so loosely lipped but he was not in the mood.

“My apologies, Mr. Graham.” This was no true apology, William could hear the cunning smirk that played on the older man's lips. He heard the man meddling about but his refusal to grace his figure left him little to go off as to what he was doing.

“Do you entertain all of your muses with such condescension?” William bit out. It was thick and heavy in his elongated throat, hoarse even.

“Do not take in muses, as I have offered to have with you.” so easily disregarding the question. He came to sit opposite William. He heard a sharp nasal inhale. “Coffee? Quite late isn't it?’ His voice was piqued, extremely playful and interested now.

“I was intoxicated beyond my means.” He was kurt as he took another sip from his coffee. Eyes were still planted to the ceiling but his gut (and perhaps the swell underneath the table) begged to take in the sight before him. He had enough wits now that the notion would only cause trouble.

“Hm… I see, Have you considered my offer?” How could he say yes now? How was he to model for a man whom he pleasured himself to? William would like to believe it was the painting, that captivating beauty of the art, the god. He knew very well that it was simply a dagger.

“I have,” He left it at that. His words hung in the air for a minute. The Count was certainly smiling, like a devious cat.

“And does it pique your interests?” William couldn't take it anymore his neck was straining and the accent laden voice already left him much stiffer under the table. There was simply no helping this inevitability. He kept his eyes closed as he inclined his neck and straightened his posture. Once appropriately sat he slowly opened his eyes. Starting at the dark wood table, up the ornate waistcoat, the cravat, the deliciously thick adams apple adorning his neck, the

clean shaven jaw, smirking lips, perfectly crafted nose and finally the maroon eyes which pinned him.

Williams jaw was set and his gaze was rough but as for his loins, they ached.

“I have been advised it is in my best interest to accept.” He would not give the man before him any satisfaction. Little did the older man know the immense satisfaction he granted William.

“It is settled then. You'll accompany me to my shop.” The man was the picture of grace. He raised a vessel of tea to his lips and as he drank his eyes never left William. Williams’ own eyes betrayed him by watching the swell and drag of his throat while he swallowed. The Count sat his cup down and leaned back slightly. Amused look never left his face.”Humor me, Mister Graham, You're looking rather…dishevelled.”

Smug bastard. William was flushed and a sudden rush of blood to the head of his cock left him breathless. He discreetly pushed a flat palm onto his loins to regain some sense of control. Admittedly he had none. He was wanton with need. Although he was certainly being provoked, if only the man quite knew what he was provoking in William.

“I am a blundering drunk, I suppose.” Liar. Williams' voice held no amusement, only tact surgical precision. He chose every word carefully as one does when they lie.

The older man let out an amused laugh, “Pray tell, does drunken Mister Graham detest his neck dressings?” Even a question this simple caused William to falter. His eyes shut for a moment and the hand pinning his manhood pressed harder.

“The flush became quite unbearable under so much fabric.” It was said between teeth.

“I can only imagine. Perhaps you should take a turn around the palace for air. The galleries are well aired.” The sly minx somehow knew what he was doing. Williams was not sure how but he knew more than he was letting on.

William tried his absolute best to grip onto the need to remove the man from all satisfaction. “Perhaps, Although I feel I should be of sound mind before I make any such attempts.” His body was betraying him so deviantly. William felt as though he could spill his seed underneath this table if he was to endure anymore of this teasing. Still, he knew he was in no position to stand from his chair.

“Indeed, I'm afraid I must retire soon. If you wish for my accompaniment on your turn about my lodgings reside in the room inside of the galleries. Are you well versed with the area by now, Mister Graham?” William was in absolute disbelief. He had to have heard him. The candles were lit because he resided there. The Count was the picture of the cat who caught the canary. William thought back to his prior actions, the salacious sound that he uttered aloud, ‘Please Lecter..yes, yes,’.

With shutter he did indeed spill his seed he tried his best to disguise a moan as a cough. He could tell it was a weak stream due to the sheer amount he had dealt on his gallery rendezvous. Nevertheless it was certainly a spill. Warm and stick against his thigh.

“Uh, yes-yes I am…I'm afraid I will be going home as well.” His voice was pitched and cracked and he knew he had no way to disguise himself, he could only hope his assumptions were wrong.

“Excellent, let me see you out.” The older man stood from his seat and walked to stand in front of William. He could have sworn he heard a deep inhale enter the Counts nose. God, what was he to do. William sat with his mouth agape.

“That is really not necessary, Count.” He was trying his hardest to get out of this without casting any suspicion.

“I really must insist.” He held out a hand to Will.

There were no other options. He grasped his hand and uncomfortably stood shifting around slightly. The touch of his hand added a new blazing heat to his pink face. He dropped his hand as soon as he registered the fact that he was grasping it for far longer than to just use it as support to stand.

“Are you alright, Mister Graham?” He asked as they began to walk.

“Just the spirits, I shall be anew tomorrow. I'm sure of it.” He was trying to convince himself just as he was trying to convince the Count.

“Perhaps a bath would help your condition.” They were walking slightly apart as William couldn't stand to be any closer.

“I will take that into account, thank you.” It was swift, too swift. The man's face seemed to hold an evitable feline mischief. It twisted William’s insides so unfairly. He was as off put by the count as he was aroused. As for in the moment, he was completely spent and embarrassed. He held onto any hope that perhaps the man had yet to visit his room. He may not have even been in the gallery.

He latched onto that as they strolled toward the door. It was the only comfort he had.

“It was a pleasure, Mister Graham.” He opened the door with a smile. His teeth flashing an appearance that sickened William. This man had no other flaw than his demeanour.

“Thank you for accompanying me, Count Lecter, I'll be on my way. Have a good evening sir.” He tried to sneak out as quickly as possible and he had very nearly succeeded.

“Oh, Mister Graham..” William rolled his eyes inwardly as he turned back around to face the man. He Stepped onto the stoop to meet William. He shoved a hand inside his overcoat. “I believe this belongs to you.” He slowly pulled out his red book and held it out to the younger man with an even more menacing smile.

Williams' face dropped and his eyes widened. He slowly walked the steps between them to retrieve the book he had thrown in the gallery. His hands grasped the leather and he knew any hope he had clutched was gone. He could lie to himself and say Count Lecter found it upon

entering the gallery but he knew better. The man found it when he left his lodgings, presumably after he heard William touching himself, moaning out for him.

“Thank you.” He said meekly but when he drew his eyes up the man was already at the door frame entering the house. William groaned quietly as he turned and trekked back to his home. Surely the man would understand he was drunk. It was not the actions that reflect a sober William. He must know that, right?

As soon as he made it into the cottage he stripped himself of his clothes. Dried seed stuck to his thigh and loins. He Had to heat water before he could bathe so he opted for a robe that tied in the front. The mask of darkness would shield him from any onlookers as he gathered well water. First and foremost he had to stoke a fire. He began immediately stocking the fireplace with logs and then he quickly started the fire, staring into it and stoking it for a few moments longer than he would have normally.

He prided himself on not needing distractions for the company of his mind, yet here he was doing activities that he would usually make quick work of in a leisurely manner as a distraction. He sighed, grabbing the large water buckets and making his way out into the cold. It did not deter him, In fact he probably wouldn't have noticed the bitter chill if it wasn't for his involuntary shiver.

After procuring the water and placing it over the fire to warm he reclaimed his place in front of the blazing heat. The licking flames comforted him. He drew his knees up to his chest, rested his chin on them, and wrapped his arms securely around his knees. William was broken, he wasn't acting like himself tonight. Admittedly he wasn't himself since laying eyes on the Counts’ paintings. This was his first moment of clarity since that day with Margot in the gallery. It was as if he was under a spell. He was so deeply enthralled with the man's art, and now he found himself just as entangled with the man.

He grabbed his buckets and dumped them in the tub wasting no time to climb inside. The semen on his skin was a sinful reminder of how he defiled a man's image without knowing him. A week ago William would have seen his behaviour as completely piggish. He still did but the feelings were overshadowed by thoughts of the Count. Even here as he sat, he still pondered over the man's beauty and charisma and infuriating condescension. Everything about the man drew him in. William had never even had interest in anyone for flesh or for heart. He thought himself incapable. Now as he sat he knew that wasn't the case.

He would not allow himself to rouse himself with the man's image any more, tonight was far too much for his mind to handle again. William even pondered celibacy as a result of the shame. He was soaking in the same position he held in front of the fire. His soft cheek slid back and forth over his slender knee over and over again. He even let a few tears trail down his stoic face. He did not rub them away, he simply let them flow until they dried into a streak. It wasn't sadness that plagued him, just confusion.

He could not sort out his emotions or thoughts at all. A lifetime of having now sharp secrets to stab him didn't prepare him for how the daggers were more like webs of twisting and turning thorns. Try as he might to assess the problem, the thorns pierced him and left him bloodied and raw. How was he to deal with this? Was there even a way? More sweet tears trailed. He lifted his head and squeezed his wet eyes shut.

He couldn't bear to be in his bath a moment longer. His heart continued to clench as he dressed for bed. His heavy eyes landed on the red book which sat with his pile of clothes. He picked it up and inside his pencil was wedged in between pages. He gently flicked open the book.

There was a simple sketch of William, He was posed as Daphne turning into Laurel as Apollo touched her. William was nude but his flesh was transforming into beautiful bark underneath an unknown hand of whomever would be portraying Apollo in lecters mind. The bark covered William’s loins and snaked up his ribs underneath the hand. Williams arms were outstretched as his finger tips sprouted branches and leaves. His delicate flesh was still visible on his right leg, chest and face. A true metamorphosis.It was beautiful. He captured Williams' likeness perfectly. It was an obvious ode to Berninis’ Apollo and Daphne.

William couldn't help the tug of his heart. Despite his misconduct with the man he still saw him in such a beautiful light. He made beauty out of William after the younger man had completely disrespected his artwork. This little sketch was the only thing that kept him from a sleepless night of silent tears. In fact as he lay down with the book clutched to his chest he found a sweet dreamless sleep almost immediately.

Chapter 5

Deep crimson stood stark against ivory. William's fingers traced delicately over it. The embossing, The carve of the beautifully filigree.

‘Sir William Graham’

It was addressed in writing that was nothing short of eloquently beautiful. The cursive was perfectly centred on the back of the correspondence. The front of the correspondence held an equally ornate wax seal, matched in colour to the ink. The seal was a crest of sorts, Imagery of a stag with antlers outstretched permeated the sanguine wax.

William had received letters from his brothers in the legion in the short fortnight he had resided in Florence. Brown paper parcels tied with twine to bind them shut, black standard ink adorned the parcels complete with a plethora of writing styles. Usually, in straighthand not ornate cursive.

From one glance William knew this was not from the legion. He also knew it not to be the lord's official stationary which a scribe would elegantly detail. No, This is was certainly the sort of posterity allocated to a certain Count. The notion made William off balance. He knew this was to be expected. He had agreed to this that night in the castle.

His fingers retraced the words that addressed him before setting the unopened letter on the chest near his entry way. He couldn't bear to read it and ponder over the shame he has been simmering in for the week hence. At least not this early. Day break had just grazed the house when a servant delivered the letter. William had quite a trifle with sleeping the night before.

Admittedly, He had not visited that gallery since he spoke Count Lecter's name like a prayer, staining the room with shameful pleasure. He had wanted to, God had he wanted to. The urge ever present. nagging at his heels and occasionally clipping them with a sharp jab of teeth. One particularly trying occasion he would stare longingly at his image of Daphne that the man of his every thought made for him.

How he loathed him,

He tormented him. William was not vain enough to stare at a portrait of himself, yet that is his last resort. The only thing keeping him from visiting the gallery again. As days passed he thought it would become easier, for it was only a mortal man's mortal artwork. He was not a god and yet William saw his art as though it was crafted to save. To make a believer. He found his heart in another man's art where it should not be. And yet, each passing day he felt the tether strengthen, double in size and dexterity. It plagued him and the sleepless night was sure to be the subject of his thoughts circulating around a man who was pretentious and dreadful.

He could not do it any longer. The letter on the chest and the red sketchbook already opened to a particular leaf that did not belong to him, were painful reminders of how weak he was.

He would go back to the castle at servants' lunch and dine with his fellows and then he would return home and read the godforsaken letter.

He had not taken lunch at the castle since the ball, Nurse Katz would journey to his home to eat with him as she had at first. William had confessed to her most of his indiscretion. Leaving out the full extent of how he had undone himself twice to the Count. Instead he described having ‘taken a special interest’ that left him quite embarrassed and exposed.

The Nurse was excellent at reading into the untold.

The idea of visiting the castle without the promise of art was daunting. This was the only way he could imagine to shake the ropes which ensnared his mind and body to the Count; To his artwork; To Bacchus.

How had a flat plank of canvas with nothing but pigments and oil trapped him so? It was not the hardened fleshy body of the foreign painter, As tempting as that was. William was brighter than his desires. This was an entrapment of the mind and skill. When William layed eyes on the art it was as if he was breathing as they breathed. As if he were as human as they were. He looked through them, into them, and saw himself. An abyss.

The agreement to model for the man was self centred. William bled to know how he did this. How had he muddled his mind so? He wondered if the artwork had the same effect on every patron who had the pleasure of casting their eyes upon the beauty the man created? They must. He assumed each relationship with the art was completely personal. Like a looking glass.

Why Williams looking glass manifested in such unbridled fascination and heat, he himself could not deduce. Perhaps as a means of proving it was there. He certainly was inexperienced in the regards of infatuation and lust. He was content without. A few paintings would not convince him to break his lonesome stride. William enjoyed his solitude far too much. Had he learned this yearn for a sexual aspect in an alternative way he would have written it off as a sham, yet the scariest part is he showed himself. His own actions, supplied with alcohol, brought this revelation. William was not the kind to lie to himself.

The Count must know he has this effect, In some aspect or another. What did the count see when he painted? What will William see in his own image? What god shall he portray for the man? Will he be clad in sheer muslin or a thick linen? What is the design Count lecter has devilishly crafted in William’s image? Shall he continue patronising through his work, through his muse?

If William was of sound mind when he agreed perhaps he would have asked himself these questions sooner.

His mind flashes imagery of himself in smooth graphite transforming into a laurel. He would be lying if he hadn't reverted back to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to refresh his mind on the poetry the elder man so delicately allocated to him. His findings did little to relieve his fascination.

Slighting Eros with an insolent tongue, ‘ Impudent boy, what are you doing with a man's weapons? That one is suited to my shoulders, since I can hit wild beasts of a certainty, and

wound my enemies... You should be intent on stirring the concealed fires of love with your burning brand, not laying claim to my glories!" Apollo had never caged his tongue or fervent passions and it was to his detriment.

Eros, offended, took his revenge. His swift wings carried him to the peak of a great mountain where the putti drew a youthfully fattened arm back to release two dreadful arrows.

The first striking Apollo, A sharp golden arrow that struck his marrow, dawned a mystification for the recipient of the victim of the twinned arrow. Where Apollo's arrow filled him with adoration and undying passion, the kin was not of the same feather.

Daphne received a blunt lead filled jab which sparked a distaste. She, like her warrioress sister, was not taken with any suitor. She felt no yearning, nor tethering for the affection which had gracefully been bestowed upon her by many.

Daphne sought her complacency in the woods. She sought out metres of thickly forested reserves with a need for exploration and sport. She was happiest as she fell into her world of trees and woodland creatures. Never entertaining romantic overtures.

She remained pure and persuaded her father, who was insistent on grandchildren, to not force her hand to any suitor. He left it with warning her immense beauty would not dispel the attention she so loathed.

Apollo upon sight, falls to her pulchritude. Instantly calling for her and as she fled, swifter than the lightest breath of air and resists his words calling her back again.' Apollo did not halt his pursuit.

'Wait nymph, daughter of Peneus, I beg you! I who am chasing you am not your enemy.'

So taken he makes chase. For sweet Daphne, its as predator is tracking her, luring her, sniffing her out. She hears his beckoning that he loves her and is concerned for injury if she makes haste in the thick wood. He offers to slow if she does as well.

She carries onward.

'Delphi's lands are mine, Claros and Tendonos, and Patara acknowledges me king. Jupiter is my father. Through me what was, what is, and what will be, are revealed. Through me strings sound in harmony, to song." He mentions that, even though he is a master archer and patron of medicine, "an arrow truer than mine, has wounded my free heart! ... But love cannot be healed by any herb…'

To no avail. The grand pursuit continues.

Eros boring of an equally matched fight supplies Apollo with a bound and wings. He quickly is greeting her footails. Daphne wading in the water of exhaustion cries out to the waters which her father inhibits.

'Help me father! If your streams have divine powers change me, destroy this beauty that pleases too well!' Her prayer was answered in haste. Her limbs fell heavy, rooted. As Apollo

finally grasped his beloved, her breast became encased in bark, her hair crisply morphing into leaves, her feet branched great roots into the ground. Under his fingers she became a laurel.

His admiration had not ceased, he grasped the tree tenderly. On the trunk he could feel her patter of beating heart, his love as alive as she. He placed a kiss upon her bark and even in her state she twisted away in fear. Apollo, though slightly faltering at her apprehension, made her a vow that he would never cease to honour,

'We kiss before we burn. You shall be treasured forever as my now precious tree.'

He promised to adorn her leaves in his hair, her wood will craft a bow and lyre, and the heads of champions and royals will bear crowns of her branches. Apollo encompassing powers of eternal youth and immortality casted Daphne to be evergreen.

'You also will wear the beauty of undying leaves.'

And with a rustle of branch and leaf, Daphne surrendered.

How William did enjoy such beauty, such tragedy. Although he may not know for certain the extent of Count Lecters design here. William drew a parallel that he, like fair Daphne, sought comfort in his solis. His routine and sketchbook was to him as her wood and sport. A tad that the Count could not have possibly known. The elder man could not have known of his own aversions to love either,

He saw a beauty in her becoming what she loved most. He imagined her beauty and earthly body were trivial to her. He could not bring himself to resent Apollo's pursuit. He was under the whims of adoration and he certainly wasn't intending to force her to be bound to bark for eternity when he fell in love with her.

It struck such inspiration in him, he poured over mythological poetry during his nightly ministration when slumber would not bless him. His sluggish body slumped over texts Miss Kats had leant him from the extensive catalogue of bindings the castle harboured. He noted a few leaves that caused his fingers to itch. He was supplied with many imagines to relay in a certain red book which sat open in front of him now.

He gathered his bearings and began taking care of his morning ministrations. Decidedly, spending too much time relaying the thoughts have been plaguing him far too long. Even as he kindled his fire, heated buckets of well water, and procured a small breakfast of sorts, he could not help but find reasons to pass the hutch that an elegant piece of correspondence resided on. He fought his self control but when he began to dress he sufficiently distracted himself.

His dressings were his standard stockings, plum breeches, ivory base shirt, matching plum waistcoat, cravat, and over coat. He paired it with brown boots. As he tamed his hair and groomed the scruff which addled his chin in his looking glass he again felt that he would never adapt to looking civil and groomed.

Secretly, he preferred his stubbled chin and unkempt curls. Most of all he preferred the lax conformities of the legion. When he didn't adorn his medics coat he wore simple white underthings, ivory shirt, brown breeches, and black boots. No cravat, no waist coat, no falsehood of ever having anything of his own that was deemed valuable. He was a heretic at heart and no fancy furnishings could cultivate the posh gauche necessary to have had the riches the clothes indicated.

He would not besmirch the opportunity bestowed upon him regardless of his preferences and affinities.

The man who consumed his thoughts was that exact gauche poshness that William lacked. Without his talent William would only see arrogance and overconfidence in his demeanour. How it displeased him! Everything about the man was all but rival to William's own proclivities. Yet, here he sat at his looking glass pondering him over. Why did his brain supply such energy to a man who equally sparked displeasure as he did adoration?

An enigma to be sure.

⇹

William followed through on his plan to visit his favoured nurse. They chattered at the servants table, under which he came undone a week prior. A pink flush graced his cheeks in the same manor they had then when he reclaimed the same seat. He reigned himself in. *You were drunk and certainly stupid, please control yourself.*

"You mean to tell me you *haven't opened* his letter? What if it was urgent?" He had caught her up on the newly acquired tabletop decoration. Truthfully, he did not surmise this could be a time sensitive matter.

"I am still mulling over my shame, Good Nurse. I barely manage a thought not laced with my indiscretion after the ball." He whispered to her. The beastly boy was paddering around the kitchen steeping tea. As transparent as he was with Miss Katz, that did not yet extend to Randall. Although William was certainly charmed by his vulgarity.

"You beguile me." She takes a grape from the small spread in the centre of the table. "He is but a man. Regardless of the games he likes to play with you, he truly is flesh and blood. That being he would understand that you were not your usual astute self." She brought the fruit to her lips and savoured it on her tongue,

"HE beguiles ME. On parchment, every word we've exchanged is nothing but banter but to truly witness his tone, his glint, his god forsaken smirk. He causes me to do things not of my nature!" He gruffs out like a child.

"You're pouting medic boy," Chimes Randall as he brings a tray of tea to the table, pouring out glasses to each in delicate little cups. "Whatever is the matter?" More aimed at Miss Katz than Willam himself.

"Sir Graham has entangled himself into the web that is Count Lecter." the nurse says sweetly, cooling her tea with a breath.

“I did not ‘entangle myself’. Randall the man is toying with me…and with great efficacy.” William thuds his forehead into his folded arms on the table, nearly knocking the porcelain vessel of blisteringly hot tea.

“Are you toying back?” He says with that toothy smile that is so authentically Randall.

“He is perfectly impassive. I don't think the man is subject to the games he employs.” Its earnest. William has never seen so much as a tinge of annoyance in the man's demeanour. His facade had the same composure that he demonstrated whilst slowly, delicately sketching on his canvas that night in the ballroom. He sliced through William with eloquence and had William not been adamant with his frustration he assumed his claims of the Counts behaviour would be written off as perspective. A non issue.

“It is my belief that every man has a nerve that elicits a response upon a well placed graze of the finger.” Randall, still grinning devilishly, demonstrates a motion of prodding and poking with his left pointer finger. “Through my lunches with you, which i've missed so, i've found that you are more than capable of uncovering such a nerve…Tell me what he's like,” *Bullshit! You've adored your one on ones with a certain ebony haired, almond eyed nurse.* The thought pulls William's lips into a smile.

“My encounters with him are biassed due to his fascination with eliciting reactions from me… I suppose all I can say is he’s gouache, prideful, pretentious, and masterfully skilled in the arts. That night at the ball he was hovering over my shoulder while I was lost in my sketchbook. I had been running my fingers over a drawing I studied in the galleries, which may or not have been a portrait of himself.” A flush rises yet again. William swallows thickly. “Upon catching me he made a quip which was overall friendly and perhaps I should have held my tongue when I lightly implied admonishment for watching me without my knowledge… He quipped back at my own observing of him through the guise of canvas in the gallery.

“From there on it was like a joust. A sweetly laced tongue eviscerated me. He was indulging himself by pulling compliments out of me… I said he had aged gracefully. Hardly anything to bat at, not as though I told him he was handsome outright!” William’s hands were emphasising his defensiveness.

“But you do think he’s handsome? That's why you were fondling his image?” Randall’s out right curiosity was so unabashed. William groaned yet again.

“It isn’t as simple as that. I admire his skill. I find there is remarkable, unprecedented beauty in his art and he is the embodiment of that art.” Tactful.

“So you think he's handsome.”Randall says with hesitation. “Perhaps he only flusters you so because you find him comely. Most rich and talented are condescending. It's in their nature to dress up their unsavoury observations with enough sugar and cream to kill a cat.”

“William’s admiration for the talent caused a sense of shock when the Count toyed with him, not to mention his charming reputation to seemingly everyone else.” Miss Katz supplied while a smile tugged on her lips. She enjoyed the show no doubt.

“I will not counter that he is comely.” a small chuckle slipped from the nurse, as to say ‘obviously’ “I suppose the blow which caused me such distress was how quickly he severed the idea of taking me on as an apprentice, after making me come out and ask. Saying something to the tune of ‘seeking one's own opportunities’. He planned that. Enjoyed it.” *sadistic.*

“He offered William the opportunity to *model* for him and he’d reconsider.” William noted the emphasis on the word model as she leaned into Randall with a smile.

“Ahhhhh” Randall says, slyly smirking. “I see all too clearly now… My advice to you, my friend, is to go model for him. If you still wanna get under his skin then be a good boy, exceptionally good. It will be hard for him to play the game when there is none to be played. Gain the upper hand so to speak” Beverly nods, smiling brightly in agreement to Randalls words.

“He's right, you know. Although, I do so love you loose lipped.” Beverly places her hand in William’s and squeezes with encouragement. “Please check his correspondence when you return to the cottage. You cannot fear him or resent him while still admiring him.” William is already on pins wanting to run home and rip it open. Almost as bad as he wants to go to that gallery and visit his image.

“I hear you both, I am not so stubborn that good advice falls upon deaf ears. Randall I think I shall try my best to behave myself, although his quick witted responses are so infectious. The gratification of having a head above him will be worth it if I can keep my own head. As for the letter,” Sheepish now. “I have pondered on it since dusk. I do not think any sooner my front door is closed upon my return, I will have torn that wax seal.” He admitted it because it was true and he's never felt safer in the company of his friends. They only hope to help him regain his footing.

“Good man.” Randall flashes those carnivorous teeth in a proud smile. He began to tuck into the centre spread of cured meat.

“I still believe he will flash the foreign charm onto you, before long.” Sipping her tea with delicacy, she warmed William as the tea warmed her. She had some innate ability to inspire hope and comfort into William. He believed her words, albeit with some apprehension.

“I see his charm, though he never seems to impose it upon me. It is as though I simply do not intrigue him enough for such sensibilities.” William shook his head, down cast at the porcelain in hand. A smooth sip fell into his mouth. No sugar or cream, how he preferred.

“Au contraire, I think you have certainly bewitched him! He would only make such niceties if you were the same as everyone else he meets.” Randall sits back smug. Point his finger in Williams direction.

“The Count told you he did not take in muses as he had with you. Why would he break his hermitude if he didn't find something noteworthy?” The nurse asked the question, having already known the answer. Her intentions were to have William supply himself with an answer.

“Perhaps he simply enjoys the game we play.” *That may be, but he could play such games with any. He specifically enjoys how you play.*

“Only one way to tell. Either outplay him or refuse to play…In light of your current befuddlement, as I suggested before, don't play. Although if you can harbour a sweetly laced tongue of venom within now and your escapade then it would please me to no end to see you outplay him.” The beastly must enjoy such a show.

“My dear William, I must impress how vehemently I believe it is not about a *game* . I don’t argue that he enjoys rousing you. If you truly believe that it's only a game then refusing to play may cause a loss of interest.” The nurse has a tone of womanly knowledge. She is wise.

William found himself so confused. What decision would be best for him. Both notions could work with just enough skillful tact, but he cannot predict the Count anymore than he could predict God.

“Seems I have plenty to weigh out… If I do ignore his jabs with naivety and win the upper hand, knock him off his balance of sorts, I still run the risk of him finding me to be dull and unworthy as a joist mate. Furthermore, If I manage to hold my own against his jabs and place a striking hit will he be impressed? Or does he simply require the upper hand with his playthings?” William prayed he could know what would at the very least procure him a slot in the Counts mind and possibly a slot in his studio.

“What do you want from him, William? Apart from mentoring.” *Fuck. What do you want?*

“I-” He huffed trying to figure it out for himself. “I suppose… I-I want level ground. Equality.” *You lie through your goddamn teeth. You want his attention. His talent. His mind.*

“It will be a feat. He is a man who commands respect from everyone. He knows of his own skill and his handsome charm. He commands more respect from the Lord than he gives him. Do you think the lord likes that the man won't make house calls for their portraits? Certainly not. Although he always levels it out with his charismatic nature.” The nurse can hardly speak ill of the Count. “ Except for with you apparently.”

“He is overall very agreeable.” Randall nods. “He greeted me at the ball. I served him wine while he painted and he was very kind. He asked me about my experience in the Manor. I told him that the Lord was just and kind to all of the servants. He did prod a little about newer affairs. I informed him about the Lord's council affairs, Lady Alana's push to soon be betrothed and her interest in an army medic, and you moving on the grounds, He was a perfect gentleman nodding, listening, asking my opinions.” *WHAT?*

“Randall, you must tell me what you said about me!”

“The conversation took place after your introductions had already been made!” Randall raises his hands in surrender. “ I simply told him that you were brilliant at sketching. I said you were smart as a whip, and that you and I got on like a fire because we both care little for the politics of high society conversation.” he laughed without care.

William dead panned. His hands fumbled to set the glass on the table.overall the words could not have been anymore than Count Lecter had already surmised. For some reason what ate him was the idea of the man engaging in a conversation about him.

“Did he say anything in response?” William pushed.

“He laughed at the idea of Lady Alana's interest in you. He asked me if you planned on taking the advantageous opportunity of her hand. I told him you didn't seem interested… He also asked what you drew and I told him you drew from his paintings in the galleries.” *As though the man's ego could not have been stroked any further.*

“I'm sure he *loved* that.” William grunted out. “I have to bid you both farewell unfortunately. That letter has been eating me and I've lost my appetite for my own lunch. I will update you both tomorrow. Good lovely Nurse, Randall.” Will Stood from his chair. He needed to exit. To feel the bitter breeze on his face.

“Of course! We eagerly await your return.” Nurse Katz said and stood to show him out. Randall gave the most comforting smile he could muster and patted his back.

“See you then, William.”

⇹

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